





# CITY OF SIN

BOOK 01

*Misty South*

EPUB CREATION BY LISA HAYES

**City of Sin**

(罪恶之城)

by

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# Synopsis

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Every drop of this family bloodline is stained with sin. They are the embodiment of contradiction; calm yet maniacal, with great memories yet often forgetful. They pledge themselves to their dreams yet often compromise, are angels that are also devils... It's why I hate them. And also love them.

The only hope of his family, a youth with the blood of elves and devils walks on a battleground of annihilation and rebirth. He wills his way through boiling lava and icy depths, killing on this field of despair to strike down the lofty figure in his sight. One day he'll grasp his blade tightly and survey his surroundings, only to find no more enemies to kill.

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# Book 1, Chapter 1 - Growing Up

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Spring was a well-liked season. Humans could finally start the new year after the slow crawl of winter, no longer needing to bear with the freezing cold and being able to obtain food much easier. There was an increase in the variety of food as well, so spring was the most important season of the year. Be it for humans, dwarves, orcs, elves, or even ogres, supernatural creatures and carnivorous beasts, they had important events during spring.

Of course, the world was really complicated, and there would always be exceptions. For example, spring was mostly meaningless to those that lived underground. In the most extreme case, snow demons absolutely hated spring. On the other hand, however, a majority of the human race found the season delightful. When the warm, moist air flowed across the mountains and the sea with difficulty to reach the village of Rooseland, the villagers knew that spring had arrived.

Rooseland was located amidst a mountain range near the coast. It was a tiny speck amidst the enormous mountains that stretched for thousands of miles, ruled by Baron Tucker under the Sacred Alliance. It was almost three hundred kilometres from the Baron's castle, so only during harvest season would the villagers see the Baron's tax collectors come over. His leadership was otherwise negligible, only felt for this short time.

The Baron taxed lightly as well, only collecting the specialties of the area so that it didn't have much impact on the daily lives of the villagers. Were the tax to increase in a poor harvest year, there would be dire consequences. It wasn't all that bad living in the mountains. As long as you worked all year round, you would be able to survive.

The lands outside the village needed to be plowed and seeded in spring, and the food harvested in summer. Hunters would begin to enter the forest at this time as well. The magical beasts, having just

woken from their hibernation, would be exceptionally dangerous and aggressive in their search for food, but there were some specialties in their bodies like precious medicinal ingredients or glands that could be turned into perfume. Their quality would be the highest in spring, so despite the casualties and injuries every year hunters always entered the mountains without fail. This made the Goddess of the Hunt the most worshipped of all the gods. Aside from the Eternal Dragon, there were as many gods and religions in Norland as there were stars in the sky.

Norland was a continent with abundant resources, ruled by divine powers under a strict hierarchy. Even a remote and peaceful village like Rooseland had quite the history, and despite being simple and sincere the villagers respected experts and disdained the weak. The small village, with only tens of households, followed its own implicit hierarchy.

The petite figure of a boy appeared outside the village, carrying a wicker basket filled with breadfruit almost as tall as he was. The winter reserves would normally be used up by spring, so before other sources of food could be obtained even this bland fruit was still an important source. It was easy to find as well, growing in the forest beside the village.

There were three other boys beside him, each one of them a head taller than the child. They had bows and pitchforks in hand, and daggers at their waists. Even if they were less than ten years of age, they were all carrying deer and rabbits on their backs, able to go hunt already. Of course they only targeted the docile animals, but it was no simple task to lay the traps to catch these animals. Be it of commoners or nobles, children of the village learned these things from their parents.

The leader of the trailing group suddenly shouted out, “Hey Richard, where’s your father? Hasn’t he taught you how to hunt? I was already in the mountains at your age, setting traps to catch rabbits by myself!”



A boy beside him followed up with a giggle, “A kid without a father can only pick fruits!”

The three older boys laughed as they dashed past Richard to enter the village. Their steps were light, making it hard to believe that each was carrying over ten kilograms of prey from the way they moved.

The little boy didn't mind their mockery, however, continuing to carry the basket on his back as he entered the village. A middle-aged man sitting at the entrance saw the entire thing, calling him over and stuffing some dried magical beast meat into the boy's hand. He caressed the boy's head with affection, “Little Richard... Aren't you mad about Beirut and his friends bullying you like this? I'll teach them a lesson later, even if they're just kids they shouldn't be so careless.”

He hadn't expected the child to shake his head in reply, “There's no need, I'm not angry.”

“But...” The man used his large, black and calloused hand to scratch the back of his head, finding it a little hard to understand the boy. He thought the kid was scared of them, and couldn't help but want to say something. After all, kids in the mountains could lack anything but courage.

However, the boy then smiled and continued to say, “Even if I don't have a father, I have the best mom!”

The man just continued to scratch his head, shocked into a silly smile by the statement, “That's right! That's right!”

The little boy hummed as he continued to carry the large basket, skipping his way into the village. His slight gloominess had given way to joy, because his mother had to stay happy no matter what.

Little Richard had turned six this year, and he'd learned happiness.

The middle-aged man was the village blacksmith, Bobby. The



boy's mother was a magic acolyte named Elaine, having come alone to the village of Rooseland when pregnant with her son. She wasn't exceptionally beautiful, but her personality was as gentle as water and her presence meant the village had a doctor for the first time. They didn't need to run a dozen kilometres to the nearby town anymore even when they were only slightly hurt or sick. Sometimes they'd even chosen to bear with the discomfort because of the distance in the past.

Elaine had set up a small medicinal clinic beside the village. Even though she could only make the most basic of medicines, she'd already saved many villagers since she arrived. The village head and some elders thus decided to give her some land, officially making her a villager of Rooseland. With a majority of the villagers being hunters, there were three main centres of authority in the village now. One was Bobby the blacksmith, and another was the village head who was a retired military officer. The last was now Elaine, who along with the other two supported the future of the entire village.

Life in Rooseland was very peaceful and slow-moving, a year passing again in the blink of an eye.

Richard was a couple centimetres taller this spring, looking like kids that were eight to nine years of age. Traditionally he'd already have learned to set traps for rabbits and other small herbivores by now.

There were many small magical beasts in the forest near Rooseland, the large ones almost never seen. The place was a training ground for the children of the village, so the hunters didn't hunt the smaller animals. They only patrolled the area every once in a while, eradicating any dangerous creatures or the rare larger magical beasts in the depths of the forest.

Still, Richard continued to carry a basket on his back up the mountain every few days. It wasn't as beat up as it used to be, but it proved he was still plucking breadfruit that was everywhere on

the mountain. Breadfruit wasn't delicious, and the villagers much preferred the meat of magical beasts which was tasty and also gave them strength.

This was all at his mother's behest. He also collected medicinal grasses, collecting a different type for each of the four seasons and having to deal with them using certain complicated processes. Taking the grass home was only half of the job, the rest only done once he'd gotten back.

What he didn't understand was that even the breadfruit needed to be processed like the grasses. In fact it actually took more time than the grasses themselves. The other villagers didn't do this, and just ate them directly after they picked up the ripened fruits that had dropped onto the ground at night. His mother instead had him pluck the fruits from the tree, with a fixed requirement for the colour and size of the fruit and even a special way to pluck it. However, when he ignored her instructions and thought there wouldn't be any difference his mother had caught him, so he didn't play any more tricks after being berated a few times. He picked the fruit seriously, processing them to perfection. Only in winter did his mother tell him that this was all to train his perseverance.

Little Richard had turned seven this year, and he'd learnt perseverance in his tasks. If he had to say what he'd disliked in all seven years of his life, it was that breadfruit was his daily dinner. It was a small nightmare that he'd never forget.

Rooseland remained the same as ever the next spring. Bobby was still single, and Elaine still had low business. The village head was as healthy as ever, being the first to charge forth in dealing with strong magical beasts. Richard, however, had finally learned to set traps. Still, Beirut and the rest had already started using short bows and following the hunters into the mountains. Already ten, they could call themselves youths. People in the town would even think they were about fifteen or sixteen with their well-built

bodies.

Setting traps required a lot of experience. One needed watchful eyes, a pair of agile hands, and some luck. With the crude tools used in making the traps, there was a high possibility that traps made by an inexperienced hunter would injure him. Richard had talent, overcoming these problems for the village youths in the very first try. His success accrued praised from the adults of the village, and Bobby especially was jubilant since he thought of Richard as his own son. This was something everyone in the village knew; if Richard were willing to call him father, Bobby would probably agree to close his shop up.

In but a few days Richard was proficient in many types of traps. He started going deep into the forest, setting up large, complex traps. Large magical beasts appeared here on occasion, and with his luck a kamchatka wild boar appeared in his sights, setting the trap off head-on. The beast's front legs were captured securely amidst thorns, rattan rope, and iron nails, and even though it was really strong the trap was so meticulously made that its struggles were borne by the entirety of the trap. The boar was unable to break free even after a violent struggle.

Hiding nearby as he observed the boar's struggles, Richard's hands were covered in sweat. It was the first time he felt like the hunting knife in his hands wasn't reliable. An injured boar was extremely dangerous, and even though the wild boar in front of him was really small he himself was only a kid.

Just when Richard was certain that his prey couldn't escape the trap, wanting to charge out, he felt a great force knocking him to the ground from behind him. He felt giddiness as blood filled his mouth and nose, hearing an arrow whistle and the boar shriek. He then heard cheers from his side, belonging to voices he knew.

Richard slowly climbed up to his feet, seeing Beirut and his party having appeared at some unknown time. One of them had pushed him aside, and Beirut was the one who'd shot the arrow. It had

landed a fatal blow on its neck, a difficult task even on a captured beast as it had been struggling constantly.

“You stole my prey!” Richard suddenly realized what they were doing, and shouted in rage.

“Everyone here can prove that I shot the boar dead. How can you say I snatched the kill? Because of that trap of yours? A good hunter knows that this sort of trap can only be used to capture rabbits.” Beirut looked at Richard with disdain.

He was almost a head taller than Richard, and was well built. Being the son of the village head, he was much stronger than other kids his age, almost like an adult. The head frequently hunted powerful magical beasts from nearby, and the meat of those beasts greatly toughened the bodies of those who consumed it.

“Why are you here hunting wild boar then?” Richard’s counter question made Beirut tongue-tied. They looked down on Richard’s thin and frail body, but they couldn’t deny that he was really intelligent. They heard that he could write a lot of words, but that was no cause for respect. What was the use of words when they couldn’t help one hunt?

Richard’s question enraged Beirut. He made a rough downwards motion with his hand, signalling a youth at his side to move behind Richard and push him to the ground again.

Richard’s small face was flushed as he climbed back to his feet. He then gripped on his hunting knife tightly. His aura at that instant caused these youths to feel extremely cold, but Richard hesitated for a moment and Beirut took the chance to kick Richard down. The youths charged on him together, snatching the hunting knife away and assaulting him with kicks and punches. Beirut even stepped on Richard’s head, causing his head to be deeply buried into the soil!

The bodies of these mountain youths were filled with strength, and their blows were not light. However, Richard didn’t struggle,

resist, or plead for mercy, just quietly bearing the assault even as Beirut hit harder and harder with his growing range. The lack of response made Beirut feel like he was being mocked.

“Do you concede?” The youths began to hit harder and harder, but Richard just let them attack him like his body wasn’t his own. Beirut actually grew terrified after a short while, scared that he’d injured Richard severely. He’d definitely be beaten when he got back home, and while the village head was as hot-tempered as him Elaine had an outstanding image in the village.

The youths gradually stopped their assault. Richard then took a while as he slowly climbed up to his feet, and Beirut tossed a few harsh words his way before taking the wild boar and leaving. Seeing them disappear from view, he rested at a tree for a long time before struggling to stand up and head home.

When Elaine saw little Richard’s body covered completely in bruises at night, tears flowed out from her eyes. The boy instead consoled her, saying he was fine and that it only hurt a little. The boy looked at his mother after medicine was applied to his wounds and asked, “I still can’t fight back?”

“Mhm!” Elaine gritted her teeth and nodded with all her might.

“Alright, I won’t fight back. But I also won’t concede.”

Beirut sought trouble with Richard a couple times after that day, beating him again and again. The worst time left Richard unable to get back on his feet, but he still didn’t plead for mercy, or even groan. He always eventually got back up after they were tired of beating him, preparing to leave. He’d then stare at Beirut quietly, his calm demeanor causing the boy to feel an iciness in the depths of his heart. That gaze was the same gaze one levelled at a corpse.

Beirut started to have nightmares that year, suffering from them for a couple of days every time he beat Richard up. The difference in their physiques was only growing, but Richard still never resisted. Beirut didn’t understand why Richard never complained about him to his father, which would get him whipped a couple of

times at the least. In fact, Richard hadn't spoken to anyone in the village about being beaten.

The youths sought less and less trouble with Richard as time went on. One time, the boy smiled at them as blood dripped from the corner of his mouth, causing them to disperse in confusion. It was also the last time they beat him up.

When Richard was eight years old, he had learnt tenacity.

# Book 1, Chapter 2 - Ceremony

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Little Richard lost his childishness by next spring. The hunting knife at his waist was no longer a decoration, used as he started to join the hunters in the mountains. He wouldn't venture too deep, nor was he at the frontlines fighting the magical beasts, but he still helped around with tasks like setting up traps and collecting prey. Blacksmith Bobby had grown elated at this, making the child a new knife with strong, tempered steel. He grew joyous whenever Richard used it to kill a magical beast.

There was always some danger associated with a hunter's life. Countless magical beasts were hidden along the coast and inside the mountains, and some occasionally got lost and headed for Rooseland. Richard once met an ashen devilwolf, a genuine rank 2 magical beast that even the village head had to treat seriously. There were only two other hunters beside Richard at the time, and it took a bitter fight to kill it. All of them suffered heavy injuries, but they still managed to drag the wolf's corpse back to the village.

Richard's abnormal calmness in dealing with the battle to the death amazed the villagers, even the best hunter of the village wouldn't be able to do better. Moreover, if it wasn't for a clean slice from him at the back claw muscles of the devilwolf, the outcome might have been different.

No matter what, little Richard had calmly faced the many dangers he'd met this year, staying collected as he dealt with the situation. He'd never cowered in the face of danger.

At nine years of age, Richard had learnt courage. It should have been the easiest thing to learn, as mountain youths never lacked guts, but the courage his mother had taught him was extraordinary. With his success Elaine stopped calling him Little Richard.

"My Richard is finally a real man!" she always said, brimming



with smiles whenever she looked at him.

One day, Richard puffed his chest out at this statement, “I still need wisdom to be a real man!”

This shocked his mother, who looked seriously at him and asked, “Tell mother who told you that.”

“It was written in a book!”

“Which book was it?” Elaine asked patiently. Even acolytes possessed great knowledge, and Elaine had taught her son many languages that were complex and archaic. Reading wasn’t a problem for the child, and he’d even completed many books on the basics of magic during the uneventful winter. However, Elaine couldn’t recall such a statement in any of them.

“It was that book in the attic. There were a lot of interesting things in it, I didn’t know the world was so big!” Richard replied in excitement.

“That book?” Elaine seemed to remember something, continuing with a smile, “It really is interesting. My Richard... A real man truly can’t lack in wisdom, but tenacity, perseverance, and courage are harder to master. You’re so smart, you definitely won’t lack wisdom when you grow up. Mother just wanted to nurture some more traits in you. Do you understand?”

“You forgot happiness!” Richard added hastily.

Elaine smiled as she caressed Richard’s head and replied, “That’s right, and happiness. Was my Richard happy these past few years?”

Richard shook his head and said gloomily, “I haven’t always been happy. Beirut bullied me, and I hate breadfruit... Anyway, Mother, what kind of person is Father?”

Elaine’s expression changed instantly, before she replied in a gentle manner, “Your father is a true man...”

Richard immediately followed up, “I know! He’s also the worst villain, someone Mother hates the most!”

Elaine chuckled. Her son asked her this question every year, and this was her reply every time. He’d already memorised her answer, but the smart child had frequently heard her light sobbing in the middle of the night. He felt her deep hatred for his father every time the man was mentioned. Children had really simple minds. Their mothers loved and doted on them, and they in turn loved their mothers the most. Richard would hate whoever his mother hated.

Richard asked about his father regularly for two reasons. One was curiosity, as his mother told him more and more every year. On the other hand, he wanted to have a greater understanding of his father so he could avenge his mother once he grew up. As for how, he was naturally clueless, but this matter had already been ingrained into his heart.

However, Elaine stopped telling Richard about his father after this, just saying that she’d only spent a little time with him so she only knew that much.

“You’ll really understand your father one day.” It was unknown why Elaine’s face changed after she tossed out this statement. It was as though something had seized her heart; even she herself didn’t know why she had uttered such words.

Richard sensed his mother’s mood had turned bad, so he secretly stuck his tongue out and said, “I’ll go read something.” He then ran to the back of the house, to Elaine’s study room cum laboratory where she brewed her potions. There weren’t many books here, all about the basics of magic, medicine, the history of the continent, the scenery, and the like that were related to her identity as an acolyte, but Richard loved to read books here at night. There was a dim magic lamp in the study room, able to shine the entire night once Elaine filled it up with magic. With oil as expensive as it was, only Elaine, the village head, Bobby, and some of the best hunters

of the village could have light long into the night.

Richard slowly passed his childhood in this rundown but warm little room. He could see a larger more complicated world from these thick books, distant from Rooseland yet fascinating. He'd always dreamt of leaving once he'd become the most outstanding hunter of the village, bringing his mother to the world outside the mountains.

In the living room. Elaine heard the sound of pages rustling from the study. Richard was hard at work reading again. The child already had a stable foundation to practice magic, but he'd never really done so. She'd forbidden him from even meditating, making him miss the optimal age of four or five to become a good magician which would've given him the accumulated mental strength to start practicing at his current age. Despite this Richard didn't think in the slightest that her arrangement was bad, being ignorant and just assuming whatever his mother did was correct.

She sat there quietly, thinking of that one extra sentence she'd spoken. A door opened up in her sealed memories, flooding forth with several events that she couldn't suppress. She felt a mild headache coming on, gently massaging her temples as she sighed discreetly. Her gaze landed on the calendar, noticing a cross on it indicating Richard's tenth birthday would be in a couple more days.

Ten years of age was the threshold for a boy to be considered a youth, only three or four years away from adulthood.

'A decade's already passed?' She stared at the flickering flames in the magic lantern, a bright light from the brass lamp illuminating her face. She couldn't be called pretty, but she still looked decent, making her one of the top beauties in the village. Ten years hadn't placed a single mark on Elaine's face, and if it wasn't for her dressing her age probably none of the villagers would remember. Strangers would think she was still only in her twenties.

Her face in the lamp was an unfamiliar sight even to her. It was too plain, not the same face she'd been born with. Even she wouldn't have imagined a decade ago that she'd be living such a simple, plain, and difficult life a decade ago, but right now she was just satisfied with watching Richard grow up day after day.

When she entered the study, Elaine saw Richard hugging and reading a thick picture book with great interest. She smiled, "My Richard is going to be ten years old soon. Mother will prepare a special ceremony to celebrate your growth."

"Yay!" Richard leapt to his feet, "Will there be presents?" These kinds of moments made it clear that he was still a boy.

"Of course! In fact, it'll follow you for life! But you need to rest well these next few days, understand? It's late already, you should head to bed."

# Book 1, Chapter 3 - Enlightenment

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Richard nodded and headed back to his room. But judging from his look of excitement, he probably wouldn't be getting any sleep that night. Elaine shook her head endearingly, and headed up to the attic with her magic lantern.

The attic was a storage for their junk, but it was well-maintained with not a speck of dust in sight. Elaine shifted a box to reveal a tiny altar of stone, a meticulous spell formation carved at its base. The only thing amiss was that the idol was missing.

Elaine took her time cleaning the altar, even getting at the difficult corners before she let her gaze fall on the thick book lying beside the box. It looked extraordinary at first sight, with at least a thousand pages. It was at least four times as large as a normal magic tome, weighing no less than a dozen kilograms. Its bronze surface shone brightly, not tainted in the least by dust or dirt of any sort, an obvious indication that it had been read often. This surprised Elaine. She hadn't been in contact with the book longer than she could remember, so Richard was obviously the one reading it. She hadn't expected the child to be reading it so actively.

She walked towards it and flipped it open. Her face didn't match up to her delicate and beautiful fingers, being a cause for numerous discussions amongst the men of the village.

The cover of the book was made of real bronze, weighty and cold as it radiated a solemnness of time. Within the book were hundreds of crystal beads that would create a small altar when activated, allowing one to listen to the voice of the Moon Goddess, Alucia.

A poem in the ancient elven language decorated the title page, praising the Moon Goddess in all her glory. Elaine still vividly remembered every note of the poem, every intonation. She flipped through the book mindlessly, the pages slipping through her

fingers smooth as water. They were mostly filled in the elven language with lifelike drawings, different from the catechisms of the humans in that the doctrines of the goddess only occupied a small part of the book. Instead, the book detailed the events and experiences of Alucia's time, including events outside Norland or even the plane. Richard was probably amused by it because he read it like it was a geography or history book.

It was hard to see anything special about the book outside of its weight, but this was once the most treasured gem of the Silvermoon Palace, the Codex of Alucia. It recorded the seven divine spells unique to the Goddess and those she deemed worthy, and Elaine had been able to use five in the past. She was the one with the greatest comprehension of spells outside of the Great Druid, possessing power and the acknowledgement of the Goddess herself. Now, though? She could barely cast one spell, and even that required her everything as well as the support of the tome.

The 7 spells loomed about in the depths of her mind: Alucia's Destiny: Enlightenment, Alucia's Blessing: Healing, Alucia's Wrath: Punishment, Alucia's Sword: Silvermoon Armour, Alucia's Will: Trial...

There were two other spells that Elaine remained unable to cast. One was Alucia's Mind: Prophecy, while the last, Alucia's Daze: Dark Moon, was something nobody had managed to use to date.

Elaine placed her hand on the book, bathing in the remnants of its divine aura. The bleak moonlight of the fifth moon shone down on her through the rooftop window, the divinity of the moonlight entering her body stealthily as she built up power for the ceremony the coming week. That would be Richard's present for his tenth birthday, the divine spell Enlightenment...

Richard was woken up in the middle of the night on his birthday, brought to the attic and made to kneel in front of the altar. The book had been flipped open already, prayers upon it that he had never seen before.

This was the ancient language of the elves, an extremely difficult and enigmatic language, but one he already spoke like a native. The prayers praised the Moon Goddess, but as he recited them in his heart Richard felt like his body had oddly turned transparent. It was as if something or someone without an aim had made a discovery, charging towards him to enter his body. He felt an icy sensation in his abdomen, spreading out to his limbs and the rest of his body as well. It was a fleeting but distinct feeling, a common phenomenon during worship or ceremony. Richard knew many ceremonies even required the target to endure excruciating pain, so he kept quiet and followed his mother's instructions to clear his mind of all distractions.

“My Richard... You will be entering Goddess Alucia's halls in but a moment, there to receive enlightenment with regards to your destiny. If you're presented with some choices there, you may choose...” Elaine stopped abruptly and shook her head. “My dear, choose whatever you want, just be sure to listen closely to the voice of the Goddess and follow your heart.”

Richard nodded despite his confusion. He felt his consciousness slowly blurring with his mother's soft prayers, as if he was disengaging from the world. When he woke up again he found himself in front of a magnificent shrine.

From his position in this arena, the shrine that was thousands of metres around made him feel as insignificant as an ant. The surroundings were made mostly of silvery-grey stone that glowed faintly, and when he scanned his surroundings he was shocked to see stars upon stars in the sky, seemingly so close that he thought he'd be able to pick some if he just stretched his hand. Both the arena and the shrine itself were floating in the starry sky.

The huge area put immense stress on him, causing his heart to beat uncontrollably as he didn't dare look around even once more. He made a beeline for the shrine, crossing the entire arena and scaling thousands of stone steps to arrive at the entrance. Were it



not for his stamina and endurance that he'd trained just like any other child in the mountains, he'd long since have collapsed. He didn't stop for a moment since he started running, feeling like the arena filled his horizon and his surroundings moved in tandem with him. It was like the entire area would crumble the moment he stopped, falling into an endless abyss.

By the time Richard arrived at the shrine's entrance, his breaths had grown ragged. His heart was threatening to jump out of his chest, and it took a while for him to calm down before reminding himself of Elaine's words as he raised his head and looked into the shrine.

The shrine wasn't a dome, instead surrounded by a circle of pristine, jade-like white stone pillars. At the middle was an altar with three goddesses atop it, all in different postures and positions.

There were supposed to be six statues on the altar, each representing different abilities. The more Richard could see, the more abilities he would be able to evoke with his enlightenment. With his extraordinary memory Richard could make out the three he had now:

Extraordinary Divinity, bestowing epic strength.

Currents of Life, giving him the power to heal.

Wind's Swiftness, increasing his speed and agility.

This rendered Richard slightly disappointed. He'd already wished for the blessing of wisdom in his heart, believing real men needed to be intellectuals. Still, it was good enough that he had these three choices, since his mother had wanted him to have more than one. Elaine hadn't told the clueless boy that more than half of those who went through this ceremony only saw an empty shrine.

The boy walked towards the altar, trying his best with wide eyes to find the blessing of wisdom, but this shrine and everything that accompanied it wasn't real. What would be the result of his

efforts? The only effect was that the three statues he could see were starting to blur in his hesitation.

“You want more abilities, don’t you?” A voice suddenly sounded in Richard’s ears. It caused him to jump and look around frantically, but he saw nothing. The voice had come abruptly, its cold robotic tone evoking a chilling fear within the boy.

“Who– Who are you?” He plucked up his courage, shouting in a trembling voice. His words resonated within the shrine, the strong echo shocking him once more.

“It doesn’t matter, I won’t appear again. Strictly speaking, I’m your other half, hidden within you,” the voice answered.

“Impossible!” Richard denied with resolution. His mother once told him his soul was extremely pure, and there was nothing that would taint him. His fear dissipated in a couple of words, the initial confusion and surprise fading as the courage of a mountain youth set in.

The voice ignored his comment, continuing, “Now go, choose whatever you want.”

The altar before Richard lit up once more, revealing three more statues. Apart from the blessing of wisdom were elemental compatibility and nature’s advocate. The former was pivotal in a magician’s training, allowing them to communicate with the elements outside their body and reducing the exhaustion of their powers. It let them cast a couple more spells than other magicians of a similar grade, strengthening one’s advancement. The latter allowed humans to know more about nature, increasing their stealth and speed in complicated terrain as well as strengthening nature spells. It also gave one poison immunity. Enlightenment had given Richard all six abilities.

“This... This is–” Richard was rendered speechless, his little head in a mess of confusion. The only logical explanation for everything was that everything was an illusion; how else could everything be

so different from what his mother and the book said?

Still, despite everything, the boy didn't forget his own purpose. He walked towards the statue of wisdom, reaching forward to touch the feet of the Goddess. This was the significance of the ceremony, having the worshipper bow before their Goddess with humility.

The moment Richard's hand touched the statue, a sharp crack resonated within his mind. It was like the entire world became lucid and clear to him, giving new meaning to the words he'd read in the holy book, "Wisdom allows people to see the world more clearly..."

All the other statues disappeared the moment he touched the statue of wisdom. The ceremony should have ended here by right, but the shrine didn't disappear yet. Richard glanced around nervously, seeing a new statue emerge on the altar.

The statue had its arms crossed in front of its chest, the head tilted to the side looking sullen but focused. What made her different from the other statues was that she didn't seem tangible, instead made up of shadow.

'Could this be another ability?' Richard tried his best to recall, but couldn't think of what this statue represented. Even the holy book had no records of this statue, but he could still recognise it as one belonging to Alucia.

"Don't you want another ability?" The voice sounded again.

"What is it?" Richard paused, announcing, "I don't want to give up wisdom."

"You can call it truth. It allows you to look at the world from another perspective, and at the end of the path you might see other things."

"Other things? What are they?" He asked out of curiosity. Silence was his only answer.

Richard wanted to leave. He knew that he could leave this place and go back to the real world at any time, leaving this world made from the power of the enlightenment ceremony. The shrine had fulfilled its purpose to allow someone with talent to grow clear about their abilities and carve their future paths.

On the other hand, this place wasn't completely virtual. The floating shrine was filled with the divine power of the Goddess, and all six abilities were blessings granted by the Goddess herself. The voice and the unknown seventh statue overthrew everything Richard knew, making him feel a devilish temptation.

‘But how could the power of a devil appear in the Moon Goddess’ ceremony?’ He truly hesitated as he looked at the seventh statue. Two voices fought in his head for dominance, but to no avail. ‘Take it, or no?’

Despite his internal struggle, Richard’s body was honest as it walked towards the statue. “The world is balanced, everything comes at a price.” Balance was one of the core teachings of Alucia’s doctrine, so what would he have to pay for this second ability?

This was the first time Richard had ever fallen into a confused struggle, but he ended up sticking his hand out anyway. His mother had told him to choose as he pleased, and he didn’t want to give up on the opportunity despite the price. Little Richard was a brave boy, willing to fight for unexpected yields. He was also smart, knowing that his mother truly hoped for him to be a hero, a really great and important person.

A greater person than Baron Tucker.

# Book 1, Chapter 4 - Truth

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As Richard's little hand touched the seventh statue, it scattered into shadows that bore into his body. For a moment he felt like he was on fire, his whole body burning with soul-rending pain that kept him awake but drove him insane. An icy sensation shot forth from his body to collide with the flames, making him feel like he was about to be torn apart.

He ground his teeth, exercising his tenacity and resolution to persist till the entirety of the shadow entered his body. Only after the last bit of it was absorbed did he relax, the shrine in front of him starting to fade.

His vision blurred, he saw the beautiful worried face of his mother just before he lost consciousness. "I got two abilities, Mother will be so proud of me!" he exclaimed within the darkness.

A large crack appeared on the altar in the attic, the very fact that such a rare altar could be damaged being appalling. Elaine didn't look good at all, blood dripping from the corners of her lips, but she could care less as she searched Richard's body, only calming down when she saw no harm was done to him.

However, she then saw a shadow looming between her son's brows, something neither the lamp nor the moonlight could cast from their position. It was like a fog that moved across his forehead, not in a hurry to leave. Ordinary eyes would not be able to see it, but under the power of the fifth moon Elaine trembled as she reached out for it. She felt a cold twinge of pain upon contact, the result of a collision between dark energy and Alucia's divinity.

"SHADOW CREATURE?" Elaine screamed. She clenched her teeth and jabbed her fingers right into Richard's temple, starting to chant the spell for prophecy from distant memories. It was a spell that she'd never been able to grasp, but right now it was her best shot at freeing Richard from the menacing creature.

Ever since she lost her position as a divine official Elaine had foregone all her blessings and the spells of her Goddess. Still, her desperate actions proved fruitful as a picture scroll flashed before her eyes. It showed a never-ending void of darkness, with no moon, no stars, only a chaotic energy pervading the universe. A large shadow loomed within the chaos, the originally messy trajectories of the energy ultimately being aimed at one position, her son.

The scroll flashed across her sight, the brief vision exhausting all her energy until she couldn't even lift a finger if she tried. Still, even if she was full of vigour the image wouldn't have left her in a different position.

Shadows were different from the darkness, their energy not a part of nature. Many species of shadow creatures wandered aimlessly between the planes, feeding on the chaos of different worlds. They were cunning, dangerous, and powerful— making them loved and hated alike by various mages.

Shadow summoning was an ancient, mature art— ranging from level 6 to level 9 spells that could grant control of a shadow creature to the caster. The chance of failure was minute, but once out of control a shadow creature would devour its summoner like it was the most delicious food they'd ever seen. Every year there was news in the mainland about accidents where mages were devoured by shades.

The shadow creature looming between Richard's brows seemed to have some indication of life, but it wasn't complete. The dark energy it possessed wasn't significant, able to be cleansed by a common shaman, but Elaine saw in her prophecy that it was a beacon for various dark beings, summoning them to this particular plane. Even if the shadow was cleansed it would be too late; the various dark beings had already set out, and Richard would be the anchor they used to infiltrate this plane.

Once a large number of creatures attacked this plane, Richard

would only be met with two outcomes. He would either be killed in the violent collision of energy, or become possessed by the strongest of them and lose control of his body forever, becoming a vessel for the creatures of the dark. Nobody could comprehend the laws of the planes; these creatures could take a few centuries to arrive, or they could come here next month.

“How did this happen...” Elaine mumbled as she closed her arms around Richard, her tears wetting both herself and her son. She lifted at head and looked at the crescent moon in the sky, and the mark like a dried bloodstain that hadn’t been there before. So the change in the moon had resulted in the change in the ceremony. This probably would not have happened if she was still a shaman of Alucia.

‘Is this Her punishment?’ Elaine thought bitterly, having lost all strength to complain about destiny or wallow in self-pity. She carried her son downstairs, tucking him carefully into bed. His brows were slightly furrowed, but his constant smiles made it seem like he was having good dreams.

Richard was a pretty boy. He’d already begun to lose his childlike features, looking more handsome and dashing by the day. Elaine looked at her own son endearingly, the center of her life for the past ten years. A decade was but a moment in her long life, but now it had seemed like forever. Richard had grown up rather slowly, looking more childlike than others of his age, but this was to be expected with his silvermoon elf blood giving him five hundred years of life. However, the reason for the brusqueness being added to his exquisite appearance was something only Elaine herself knew.

The shadow continued looming over Richard’s face, causing Elaine to sigh softly as she left a goodnight kiss on her son’s forehead before leaving the room. She sat alone in the living room and stared at the night sky, events of the past playing in her mind like they’d just occurred yesterday. Those nights were the essence



of all the passion, hatred, and love in her entire life, and she couldn't help but think of them once more. The fifth moon had just given way to the sixth; when the seventh peeked on the horizon, it would be a new day.

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The radiance of the seventh moon spilled through the window. Elaine looked more worn than ever, but also more attractive than before. The mirror on the wall now reflected a beautiful figure, Elaine's original appearance that she'd almost forgotten over these ten years. It was a beauty only silvermoon elves possessed.

She stood up, taking out a piece of magical parchment decorated with stars and spreading it on the table. She then took out a well-sealed magic pen made from a griffin feather, checking the unique unicorn blood ink to see whether it was still working. There was little ink left, but she wasn't writing a long letter either so it would suffice.

The light feather quill felt oh so heavy in her arms, and she couldn't bring herself to write anything for a long while. It took the first ray of sunlight shining through the window for her to laugh and mumble, "Someone who destroyed the Silvermoon Palace will be able to defeat dark beings, won't he? What's more, it's been ten years..."

She finally convinced herself to draft a meticulous spell formation on the paper before penning down a long name:

Gaton Isaiah Satanistoria Archeron.

The magic pen shook the moment she finished writing the name, its tip shining with red light like the burning flames of a fire. All that was left when the fire extinguished was a faint, almost invisible mark. Nonetheless, the mark could only be eliminated only if the precious paper was destroyed. As an ex-shaman, she was aware of the secret of bloodlines. The burning flames signified that this name written down with demonic power had already triggered

the power of law, being felt by the owner of the name. Everything she wrote down next would be delivered to the person in question, across the boundaries of space and time.

The pen stopped again, the hand that held it trembling. This had proven another thing— Gaton really had given her his real name. Though she hadn't once suspected him, it had been proven true for the first time. With the advantage of knowing his real name, she could cast the most malicious curse on him with just a little demonic power. Even as a legendary being he wouldn't be able to escape the damage, truenames being the most significant secrets of certain bloodlines.

‘That idiot actually revealed his real name,’ she couldn't help but think. But these thoughts were easily replaced by memories of the large and decadent forest. Her hands grew cold, but they no longer shivered. She jotted down her thoughts with short yet precise words, only hesitating again when it came time for her to sign off. She hesitated, but proceed to pen her name down with exquisite and elegant writing:

Elena Moonsong.

The paper burned intensely and turned to ashes within the blink of an eye. The information within was being delivered. Elena put down her worries and troubles with that pen, looking quiet and beautiful.

# Book 1, Chapter - Parting

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Little Richard slept for seven days straight, only opening his eyes when the sun shone into his room on the seventh.

The first thing he did when he woke up was to run out of his room and look for his mother. Finding her in the study, he threw himself at her immediately, exclaiming, “Mother! Guess what I got from the Moon Goddess’ shrine?”

Elena turned around and caressed his head gently, “Let me guess... My Richard always wanted to be a mage. Did you get the blessing of elemental compatibility?”

However, the woman who’d turned around to face Richard was someone he’d never met before. He was dazed for a bit, but he still had his own way of recognising people. He sniffed around for a bit, smelling a familiar scent, “Are you... my mother?”

“My dear Richard, this is Mother’s real form. Am I pretty?” Elena cooed with a smile.

Richard nodded his head, “Mother is the prettiest!”

Elena, or rather Elaine, had always been the prettiest, most beautiful woman in Richard’s little heart. But now that his mother had revealed her true form, the beauty of the silvermoon elves that was on par with their magic had revealed itself.

Children were an impatient lot, and Richard didn’t have the restraint to let his mother continue guessing. “I got wisdom and truth!”

“Truth?” Elena was shocked. She knew about the blessing of wisdom, but she’d never heard of a blessing of truth before.

Richard furrowed his brows, trying to explain with his newfound wisdom, “Truth is... Hmm, the blessing of truth is something that lets me see the powers of the world more clearly. It isn’t very useful right now, but it can be enhanced in the future and let me

look farther, listening more clearly.”

Elena hummed in response, her hand on Richard’s shoulder as she told him to cherish his newfound abilities. She also spent an entire hour, at least in Richard’s view, nagging at him not to forget her teachings either. He made a funny face in response to his mother’s unending speech; he was a smart boy with an excellent memory in the first place, and with his blessing of wisdom he wouldn’t need to listen to the same thing twice.

Elena finally stopped once she realised she’d been going on too long, “My Richard, do you want to see Father?”

Richard furrowed his brows again, thinking hard for an answer that wouldn’t come. Elena ended up interrupting him before he came to a decision, “You’ll be able to see him very soon. He sent some people to pick you up, they’re on their way now. Now, you better remember to be on your best behaviour, alright?”

“Huh?” This was coming all too fast, and Richard didn’t even have the time to formulate a proper response. He suddenly realised, “What about you? Won’t you be coming as well?”

“No, mommy is not going.”

“Then I won’t go either!” the child said with resolution.

Elena smiled in response, “No, you have to go. Mother has a wish you need to help fulfil.”

“Don’t worry about that, Mother! I’m already all grown up; tell me what you want, I’ll get it done by hook or by crook!” Richard said with confidence.

Elena’s warm tone completely contrasted the intense gaze she levelled on her son, “When the day comes that you’ve grown to become a real man, I want you to put my and your father’s family cemeteries on the highest peak.”

The boy nodded his head, albeit a little too enthusiastically. He was still too young to understand what this wish really was, but a

mountain youth wouldn't ever back down...

Mornings in Rooseland were normally calm and quiet, but the serenity of the village was broken by light tremors today. The vibrations increased in scale, eventually shaking even the slowest of the village elders out of their slumber. The villagers peeked out of their houses, looking at the end of the road, feeling cold.

The mountain winds were cold, causing even the bravest of warriors to shiver and tremble. However, the chill they felt today was a different kind, one of the heart that foreboded of something bad to come.

The villagers all gathered at the village entrance as the tremors continued, shaking the mountain to its core. They could see smoke rising in the distance, the trees swaying in a menacing manner as the birds fled their nests, flying straight for the mountains.

A demonic knight suddenly rushed out of the forest on horseback. His black armour was covered in spikes, with a skull on his breastplate. Even his horse was nothing like what they'd seen before, at least half a metre taller than average. It too was adorned with thick, spiky armour, indicating that the spikes weren't just for defence. Beside the horse were two huge swords, looking like they each weighed over a hundred kilograms. Such power wasn't something you stood up against.

The battle horse destroyed the gravel path in its wake, sending stones and mud flying all around that left dents everywhere. 20 more followed the first knight, and behind them was an army of warriors, all equipped with shiny magical bows and sophisticated armour. An army like that could easily wipe out Baron Tucker's castle, but here they were invading their small village.

The villagers paled. The hunters may be brave, but they knew they didn't stand a chance against these knights. Even the village chief picked up on some signs from the unusually tall horse— his military experience and instincts told him that these knights were

very strong.

The knight brought his steed to a halt, its hooves creating yet another dent in the humble path as a gust of fire swept out of its nostrils. The knight scanned across the villagers, expressionless, “Do any of you know where Elena stays?”

The villagers looked at each other, puzzled. There wasn’t a woman named Elena in the village. The blacksmith and village chief seemed to recall something, but they chose to stay mum as well. The knight turned gloomier by the second.

However, Elena emerged from her medicine shop before he could speak, “Did Gaton send you here?”

The knight’s expression changed almost the very moment he looked at Elena. He swiftly got off his battle horse, landing in front of the elf. His helmet was removed as he bowed his head in respect, “I am Mordred, a knight of the Lord. I’m here under his orders, to bring you back.”

Mordred had spiky maroon hair, and even with his head bowed down his aura was no joke. Everyone near the medicine shop trembled in his presence.

Elena’s own dress waved slightly, but she didn’t back away. It felt like she was standing atop a gust of wind as she spoke, “That makes me feel much safer.”

Mordred laughed heartily, “Thank you for your compliment, my Lady.”

Elena grabbed Richard from behind her, putting his small hand in Mordred’s, “This is the one Gaton wants. His name is Richard..... Richard Archeron.”

Mordred looked at the child carefully, before taking Richard’s hands in his, “I am at your service!”

The knight looked up to Elena, “I believe you’ve already packed, my Lady. Let us set off immediately, Lord Gaton must be very

anxious to see the two of you!”

“There’s something important I have to take, please wait here.” Elena walked back into the shop, closing the doors. It left Richard alone with the big and mighty Mordred. The child stared right at the knight, and the knight returned the favour. After a while, Mordred burst into laughter for no apparent reason.

However, his smile then froze upon his face.

A sudden burst of flames emerged from the medicine shop, blasting its roof almost ten metres into the sky. Even a powerful knight like him hadn’t noticed when the explosion occurred!

The knight let out a shout, charging into the medicine shop. The walls were like cheese to him, even the raging flames unable to do the slightest bit of harm. Inside he was greeted by the sight of an elegant Elena. He wanted to save her, but was shocked to see that the flames were coming out of her body. Elena had set herself on fire!

She smiled once when she saw Mordred— And then she burnt and disappeared, leaving no traces behind.

Mordred stood up straight, his body still engulfed in flames as that smile was etched into his memories. So beautiful, so elegant... And yet, so complicated.

Richard was hysterical, kicking at the other knights that were stopping him from entering the shop, but his efforts proved futile. The place crumbled down right in front of him, Mordred walking out of its ashes to see a devastated child crying like his life depended on it.

He remained silent for a short while, before saying, “You had a great mother. Let’s go, I’ll bring you to your father.”

The abrupt event stupefied the villagers of Rooseland, as they watched the flames die down in a daze. They didn’t want to believe that the medicine shop that had been there for them these past ten



years had been ruined in the blink of an eye.

Mordred stayed behind with the army as the remaining knights got back in formation and escorted Richard out.

He didn't intend to have Elena buried— she'd been lost entirely to the flames. Only a crazy genius would be able to burn themselves completely, and it gave Mordred a newfound respect for this woman he'd only met once. The corners of his mouth curved into a smile as he looked at the ruins, mumbling to himself, "This woman truly is worthy of my Lord."

A knight approached Mordred from the side, "What should we do with the villagers here, Sir Mordred?"

He glanced at the folks that gathered round the commotion, caressed his prickly stubble and saying with indifference, "This village has too many grown men, the Lord will not be pleased. Kill everyone!"

# Book 1, Chapter 6 - Family

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Gazing at the distance, Richard realised that his father was a great man. He was looking at the distant Azan Peninsula, and its city with a population of over 100,000. The city was built along the shape of the coast, looking like an arc extending to the archipelagos of the Apennine Seas while being steep in the northwest. The long, narrow piece of land was like a beast in slumber lying between the heavens and the seas.

The houses and streets of Azan were organised systematically, with a 20-metre tall wall surrounding it to protect its residents. Vast lands and inexhaustible water lay on the outskirts of town, the Rhine River cutting through its centre to empty out into the seas as it provided unending irrigation for the fertile land.

The renowned Blackrose Castle upon a hill within the city, a complex and majestic building that could house more than 3000 warriors. Trebuchets were built atop the various towers of the castle, looking over the city with disdain. None of them had ever been put to use since their construction; no enemy had ever breached the city walls.

The castle city was the best of deterrents, designed more than carefully with a fortified core and complex mechanisms protecting it. The wooden battlements at the top could be extended and retracted, and the tunnel-like entrance to the city had at least five layers of sluice gates at least ten metres deep. There were many other traps as well, not visible to the naked eye. Indeed, it was claimed that only a thousand warriors could protect Blackrose Castle once it had been completed, the castle being impenetrable as long as they had sufficient supplies.

Many travelers of various identities visited this city, each with their own motives, but they all had to agree that the architect of Blackrose Castle was a genius. An unnamed general from a noble family was once invited to perform a thorough analysis of the

castle, and he concluded that even with a well-equipped army of 50,000 alongside siege one would have to pay a disastrous price to take the castle.

However, the castle had never been put to the test. Its previous lords had never been keen on defence, and even if they had the weaker army they'd rather use the vast plains of steep mountains to kill their enemies using guerilla warfare. What's more, they'd always won.

The lunacy of the Archerons was well-known within the Sacred Alliance. Nobody would fight these lunatics, especially with the family having geniuses within its ranks at all times. Duke Joseph of the Renon Peninsula, once the biggest enemy of the Archerons, once said the combination of lunacy and genius multiplied the family's power. A 20,000 man troop of his had been defeated by the Archeron elites in a long, violent battle, less than a tenth surviving the battle. And this wasn't with any random soldiers; Joseph's troops were amongst the best on the entire continent!

The Acheron family tree had two marquesses and seven earls to its name in its several hundreds of years of development, alongside numerous viscounts and barons. The family also held more than 25 million acres of land despite their rather short history, their strength and influence in the Sacred Alliance not to be belittled. It was bizarre how many of their ranks occupied noble positions despite them not having a duke, forget a grand duke, to their name. They had great armies, powerful mages, strong warriors, and countless subordinates of strange occupations like dragon warlocks, hellriders, and shadow shamans. This was in a continent that was never at peace.

Indeed, Norland was always enveloped by the fires of war. The human race occupied less than half of the continent, and was constantly at war with the other races for land and survival itself. However, humans didn't war like the demons; the latter did fight against the other races, yes, but they also fought ceaselessly

amongst themselves. The neverending battles on the continent affected the depths of the oceans, and even many other planes.

With such chaos in the lands, it honestly wouldn't have been difficult for the Archerons to have a duke or grand duke of their own in a couple of generations. They just had to use their resources wisely, establishing a complete government with law and economy and distributing their profits amongst their ranks. At least half of the current dukes of the Alliance came about through these methods, something that made the royalty of the other kingdoms act like the Sacred Alliance was a bunch of parvenus and country bumpkins, the royal family being the worst of them all. However, the Sacred Alliance's royal family had inconceivable might, so it had still garnered the respect of the old, esteemed families.

The rise of the Archerons was inferior to none, but their short history left them without as much wealth and power as the other families. Another problem was that they were simply too crazy to garner any respect.

The current leader of the Archerons, Marquess Gaton, was a prime example. He was a mere grade 3 warrior fifteen years ago, but he improved quickly with time. Just a decade had passed since he'd defeated the Silvermoon Palace of the Evernight Forest, shocking the entire Sacred Alliance. Many had stepped foot in the forest before him, but none were daring or skilled enough to succeed at the task with fifty rune knights and a thousand men.

Gaton was already a marquess at 33 years of age, having moved into Blackrose Castle and taken control of Azan, which was the territory of the Archeron leader. His experiences were described like legends as they spread mouth to mouth, and they were still being written down in books. The truth was, however, that his influence only extended to Blackrose Castle and the lands he'd usurped. The other members of his family almost always turned a blind eye to his commands, and he was merely a titular leader who'd have been disregarded completely if not for Blackrose

Castle.

Some historians who'd studied the Archeron family tree had concluded that there was one reason for the Archerons not having a grand duke in their ranks: there was a rebellious streak in their bloodline. No Archeron would be subordinate to another, even if the other was their own father.

The study wasn't detailed, nor were the historians extremely knowledgeable or reputable. The cold, hard truth was that they wished for sponsorship from the Archerons, or they'd end up on the streets. Those with capacity wouldn't have delved into research on an uncharted family to begin with, and these people would ultimately die as plagued beggars on the streets.

Rumour had it that the leader of the family had flipped through their research for only a few seconds once it was sent to him, ordering all its members to stop supporting the historians. It was the first time the rebellious Archerons had followed through with an order. There was only one reason for this. Even if the report was filled with utter nonsense, with illogical statements and baseless accusations, their conclusion was the absolute truth.

Rooseland Village was a mere 3,000 miles from Azan, a journey less than half a month. Mordred had filled Richard in on his family history during the trip, along with some information about the customs and the distribution of power on the mainland. By the time they'd arrived in Azan, Richard knew a little more about his family.

Family. It was a fairly new term to the boy who couldn't even grasp the concept of a father in the past. However, it was very important to the mighty knight, and held a broader meaning than most. It wasn't just the direct and distant bloodline relatives, also including the various noblemen and knights under the various members. The bloodline liked every member of the clan, but it also transcended that. Different bloodlines possessed different abilities, and their combinations would often result in new powers. Some

were stronger than others, and many died to chase after them. Thus, royal marriage held a completely different meaning in Norland. It wasn't just political, also intended to produce stronger, more powerful descendants.

As Richard stood before the entrance of the castle, he should already have had a deep understanding of his roots, the Archerons. However, he found himself more confused than ever, the information Mordred had given him like tiny puzzle pieces that he could not put together.

# Book 1, Chapter 7A - An Irresistible Woman

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The army dispersed upon returning to Azan, returning to their homes to rest. Mordred entered Blackrose Castle with Richard in tow, settling him down in a guest room on the outskirts of the castle. Two young maids soon brought him brand new clothes and accessories, even filling the wooden bathtub with hot water. Marquess Gaton would see him at dinner, and by then the boy would have to bathe, change, and rest.

Richard was done with the bath quickly, leaving himself an hour to rest in bed after he was changed. Although he was still tired from the long, arduous journey, he couldn't calm his excited brain in the slightest. The two maids had bathed him personally, and he didn't even lift a finger before the process was complete. He'd tried to refuse, even struggled, but they'd easily repressed him with strength greater than that of the village chief. They appeared delicate, but he hadn't been able to resist them at all, ending up obediently letting them clean him from head to toe. Even the roots of his hair and the crevices of his ears were scrubbed squeaky clean.

The guest room Richard was in wasn't very expansive, but the ceiling was still more than five metres high. A tall, narrow window was located at the three metre mark, letting the daylight shine in on the unpolished obsidian walls. The rough walls were adorned with tapestries, swords, and shields, a deep scarlet that Richard couldn't distinguish from dried blood. The room itself was still dark, blurring his sight even at midday without a lamp. He could feel a sinister aura radiating from every corner of the room as he lay in bed.

There was also the fire flowing in his veins: something the two maids had started. They'd been secretly giggling amongst themselves during the bath, but the smart boy had been aware of their 'special' intentions.

With both the gloomy cold and searing heat affecting him, Richard's thoughts grew even more chaotic. Ever since he'd left Rooseland— nay, ever since the enlightenment ceremony that fateful night, everything had felt like a dream. The world right now just seemed so unreal.

He finally heard a knock on the door while he was lost in thought. It was time for dinner, and he was taken to a dining hall within the castle that was quite a distance from the guest room. As he followed the maid to the place, Richard's only impression of the place was that it was large and dark. All the buildings were extremely tall, to the extent that even though the long, winding passageway was illuminated it couldn't cast light on every single corner. It left silhouettes looming across the castle amidst the swaying shadows and pitch darkness that normal sight couldn't pierce through.

At the centre of the castle was an outdoor area he'd passed before, with the vegetation casting flickering shadows that messed further with his vision and caused him to tense up involuntarily.

A faint odour seemed to be diffused throughout the castle, lingering behind and clinging onto him with every step he took. It made him feel repulsed and uncomfortable from the depths of his soul, a disgust that he couldn't express in words.

The dining hall he was led to wasn't the largest in Blackrose Castle, but its size was still befitting of even a duke. The hall was fifteen metres tall, extremely lofty and gloomy in spite of the torches lining the walls. Their light could hardly illuminate the mural on the domed roof.

The table was twenty metres long, and Richard sat upright at one end dressed in the attire of a young noble. He was facing his father across the table that could serve up to thirty people at once.

His father was an oddly charismatic man, with a smile on his face. His hair was combed back so neatly that not a single strand



was loose, forming an indispensable part of his face alongside his short, thick mustache. Time had already left a noticeable mark on him, fine wrinkles creeping along the corners of his eyes. Those emerald orbs were clear and pure, but those who gazed upon them would feel like they were staring into an abyss. Sat there casually, he skillfully sliced the roasted lamb chops on his plate as he ate in quick bites, sipping on the red wine on occasion. His actions were strangely rhythmic; in fact, even the most fussy etiquette trainer wouldn't be able to pick out any slip-ups in his actions. Of course, he was eating too quickly, and too much, but his elegance made it hard to notice the several kilograms of lamb vanishing in a few breaths.

Richard couldn't deny that Gaton was very graceful and charming, even as he wanted to smash the silver plate in his hand into the man's face. It would be a while before he learnt of the sheer number in that same camp.

But for now he had to bear with it; not for himself, but for his mother. He still didn't understand the implications of his mother's wish, but his unwavering determination, patience, and wisdom let him know that he'd understand its profound meaning in the near future.

Little Richard tried his best to sit with his back straight, and handled his food clumsily. The feast laid out in front of him was sumptuous; the delicacies by the huge kitchen of the Blackrose Castle were renowned, and the kitchen crew was made up of the best rotisseurs and patissiers in the entire peninsula. However, he didn't at all know how to appreciate the food he had put in his mouth. He hadn't received etiquette training, and one would be able to tell that he came from the countryside just by looking at the way he gripped his fork and knife. He had no clue about table manners.

However, Richard looked very handsome after his change of clothes, and his composed melancholy greatly resembled Gaton's

own. Quite a few amongst the streams of maids entering and leaving the room cast secret glances at the adolescent who'd grow into his manly charm in a couple of years.

After gracefully yet miraculously polishing off over 20 kilograms of lamb chops, Marquess Gaton finally wiped his mouth clean with a snow white napkin and smiled. His huge mouth revealed two rows of dazzling white teeth.

“You are Richard.”

Richard merely nodded, and didn't say a word. He could tell that Gaton was using a narrative tone, and that sentence didn't need to be answered.

Gaton smiled. “You're quite fortunate to be an Archeron... You're also quite unfortunate, for the very same reason.”

Richard lifted his head and met Gaton's gaze. He said calmly, “My name is Richard.”

Gaton's gaze was as clear as water, yet few could look at him in the eye. Yet, Richard had held his head up high and didn't retreat even by the slightest bit.

Gaton laughed, before exclaiming, “You're quite like your mother! But she never mentioned that your name was Richard Ragobar?” Although it was a question, he said it as though he was making a statement, just like before.

Little Richard hesitated for a while before speaking. “That's right.” Now, he had more or less understood a little of his mother's intentions.

“So, your surname is still Archeron, regardless of whether you acknowledge it or not.” Gaton said. At this point, he had already finished eating the main course. Ten maids stepped forward with a wave of his hands, clearing out the dishes he'd polished off like a stream. They replaced the silverware with brand new ones, and served seven dishes for dessert.

Gaton devoured the dessert once more with the same elegance and speed, speaking at the same time. “Allow me to digress.

“Even the most experienced nobleman would be unable to pick out a flaw in my posture, but those old-school nobles still think that I am part of the nouveau riche. Yet there’s this prominent figure we call Bloodthirsty Philip, someone whose favourite dish is raw demon meat that’s less than an hour old normally. The only exception he makes is to extend it to a day for rare breeds. On top of that, he likes to tear the meat apart with his own two hands before he eats. Still, the old people think he’s the true role model of all nobility. Do you know why?”

Richard shook his head. The world of nobles was an unknown to him, what little information he did have coming from Mordred on their trip. The knight clearly wasn’t a qualified tutor.

“Because this Philip is the great emperor of our Sacred Alliance. His Imperial Majesty wields formidable power and is very temperamental, so the older noble houses don’t wish to infuriate him. There’s benefits to having someone so big in their circles, and the hefty benefits are irresistible.”

Richard understood a little of the explanation, so he nodded.

“You are unfortunate to be an Archeron. You must grow strong and powerful, making the world your paradise, for without strength only hell awaits you in every corner! You won’t have to bother about whether you grew up in the mountains or were born in the most magnificent and majestic of castles. You won’t have to put on an act like I am now, those are all meaningless illusions! You only need to become formidable! You are an Archeron, and Archeron blood courses through your veins! As long as you carry this family name, people will look at you with hopes and expectations, placing you on a pedestal unlike any other! If you are only a tad bit stronger than the ordinary person, **YOU WILL DISAPPOINT EVERYONE!**”

Gaton's voice grew louder as he spoke, and by the end of his speech his words were like thunderclaps resounding in Richard's ears, so much so that the boy started to grow dizzy. He gripped tightly onto the cutlery in his hands as he blankly turned towards the man who continued to maintain impeccable poise despite his volume. He couldn't care less about the piece of food that had rudely fallen from the tip of his fork and onto his plate.

Gaton suddenly restrained his thundering voice, and revealed that charming smile once more. "As long as you possess enough power, you can do anything you please, regardless of whether it has any meaning or no matter how absurd it is. Just like this."

As he said that, Gaton called upon a maid and grabbed the clothing in front of her chest. He ripped her entire assembly apart with ferocity, instantly revealing her bare, naked body. The maid instinctively cried out in fear, but immediately choked back the shrieks that were about to follow. She obediently placed her hands on either side of her body, without the slightest intentions of covering up her exposed breasts and abdomen.

The butler, some male servants, and guards and knights were also present in the dining hall, leaning against the wall like statues. Mordred, who'd brought Richard over from the village, was amongst their ranks. They all seemed to come to life at that moment. Even though they remained in standard position, there was no doubt that their eyes were all over the maid's body. She wasn't considered extremely beautiful, but her youth gave her a body brimming with attraction.

Richard was dumbstruck, the scene almost too much for the ten-year-old to handle. The toughness he'd trained in since his youth took effect, however, as he held firmly onto the cutlery in his hands to ensure that it didn't fall out of his grip.

The maid only dared to gather her clothes after Gaton waved his hands, but she didn't dare cover her bodied. She curtsied as she maintained normal posture, retreating from the hall while still

facing her masters. She only dared to turn around after she reached the hallway, afraid that she'd meet with more misery if she ran away without courtesy.

Indeed, Gaton's voice sounded from behind her. "I originally wanted to kill someone for you to see, Richard, but I was in a bad mood a while ago so I killed everyone I could get rid of. The other nobles had planted some moles in here! A pity I couldn't control my temper when I found out."

Richard turned pale. How could one speak of murder so easily, in such a frivolous tone? Yet, the expressions of everyone in the dining hall remained the same, from the servants to the knights. It was as though what their master just said was as common as him hunting for animals and serving them up with vegetables. It was then that Richard became vaguely aware of what exactly that faint odour permeating the castle was. It was the stench of blood, accumulated over months and years.

Just like he with the main course, Richard couldn't appreciate the dessert even as he finished it. He tried his best to resist the churning in his stomach, a gruelling task to prevent the food he'd just eaten from rushing up his throat. The smell grew more distinct once he realised its origins, lingering at the tip of his nose.

However, Richard ate quite a bit. He was in puberty, and children who grew up in the mountains were used to eating more. Gaton was rather satisfied. "Eat more, so that you'll grow quickly. Richard, did your mother have any wishes that she wanted you to fulfill?"

Richard's expression changed. His silence was an affirmative, but he had no intentions of telling Gaton about them before they'd become reality.

Gaton didn't press Richard any further, merely saying, "No matter what your mother's wish is, achieving it is probably no easy feat. I will not assist you directly, nor grant you any power, but I

will give you enough chances to grow stronger. As for how far you will go, it all depends on you. I hope that one day, you'll be able to speak loudly to me."

Richard nodded, but didn't speak.

Gaton muttered to himself for a while, and said, "I'll get you a teacher, and you'll spend the next few years with her, learning. I hope you'll give me a pleasant surprise the next time you return. Not just for me, but also for yourself, and for your mother.

"That's all for tonight. Now go, go meet your brothers and sisters, it'll be very... meaningful."

# Book 1, Chapter 7B - An Irresistible Woman

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Richard didn't understand what Gaton meant until half an hour later. Still, it would take him a few more years to understand the deeper significance behind this truly profound experience.

He'd been on a high-backed chair in the meeting, as stiff as a statue. His gaze had been tilted up a little, fixed on a mural above the door.

The meeting had taken place in a small drawing room in the inner part of the castle, located in a different wing from the dining hall that was meant only for the family to use. The grand, lavish decorations here greatly contrasted the rest of the castle, warm and bright with light from illumination spells making it as bright as day inside. The numerous candles in the gorgeous holders added a perfect warmth to the room aside from the lighting as well.

Richard's siblings were seated on couches to either side of him, two younger brothers and six sisters of various ages. He'd never imagined that he had so many half-siblings; when his cousins were added on, this number would probably grow.

His brothers were seated on his left, and his sisters on his right. He was right in the centre, bearing their scorching looks as they watched him attentively, like a rare demon just waiting to be dissected. Unlike the statue that was him, his siblings were much more unbridled and arrogant.

The two boys were much younger than Richard, but their gazes were filled with explicit curiosity, contempt and hostility; everything but affection. Their stares made the hair on Richard's neck stand, which only happened when he could feel murderous intent. His six sisters were all of different ages: the eldest proved to be a young lady judging by her swelling bosom, and the youngest was likely less than five years old. The looks they gave him were much more complicated as well; there was inquisitiveness, but also

hesitation as they scrutinized him. The two oldest were huddled together, discussing in low voices and glancing over at him from time to time as they occasionally erupted into unbridled laughter. Richard still couldn't understand what it was, only that it was definitely of no concern to their brothers and younger sisters. It would take some time for him to realise that it was what women did to men they wanted to sleep with.

Richard didn't speak a word. He didn't know what to say at all, and his siblings didn't seem intent on conversation either. They levelled their constant, piercing gazes at him, some filled with such pointed callousness that they threatened to stab a hole through him while others radiated a hatred like they wanted to devour him whole.

They only met for ten minutes, but to Richard it felt like an extremely long day had passed by the time the butler brought him out of the drawing room. He discovered the dress shirt he was wearing underneath his clothes was already drenched.

He later realised that the ten minutes in which he met his siblings was actually a sort of ceremony that represented their approval of him as part of the Archerons, and that he would be part of the family from now on. Such a ceremony also allowed the members of the Archeron Family to get to know each other, giving them opportunities to select each other in the future.

Richard departed Blackrose Castle the next noon, escorted by a small party of troops as he headed west. He hadn't seen Gatton again since dinner, and his father hadn't come out even when he left Azan. The meeting was simpler than he had imagined, and also much more cold and indifferent. He hadn't had any expectations in the first place, but he still felt a vague sense of loss when he left. The number of siblings made him understand that he was just another child to his father.

However, Richard secretly clenched his fist so hard that his fingernails scraped his palm. Two scenes superimposed themselves



in front of his eyes: one was of his numerous siblings, and the other was the raging flames that continued to burn that day. He suddenly felt that his mother died such an unjust death.

The team headed west, with Mordred still being Richard's escort. The knight spoke much less this time, only adding a few sentences in on occasion for the twenty day journey. They passed through dark forests, crossed the Roman River that stretched across continents, trudged along the pale mountain ranges for another ten days, then passed through the territories of a dozen nobles and even a grand duchy before they finally arrived at their destination: the Deepblue, a magical tower in the territory of the legendary Grand Mage Sharon.

Space possessed power of its own. An immensely vast space will always exert some kind of actual pressure on people.

Standing in front of the Deepblue, Richard truly understood how vast a magical tower more than 500 meters tall could be. This wasn't just a standalone structure, but an entire complex of buildings extending from the Everwinter Mountains to one of the tributaries of Floe Bay. The central building was built in gothic style, its flying buttresses adorned with complicated and exquisite carvings. An eye-catching spire and pointed arches supported the door, while colourful clouds of elemental particles and arcane energy encircled the peak. The entire magical tower seemed to be floating up towards the sky.

Richard met Sharon quickly. This was a legendary mage, a guardian of the Sacred Alliance, and the instructor his father had chosen for him. Only face to face with the dragonslayer did he realise that she hadn't even agreed to coach him; the journey was entirely his father's wishful thinking.

Richard now stood in Sharon's magical hall, which was a dreamlike space. The walls and the ground were made of some unknown, sparkling material that was a translucent navy blue. One would be able to peer into the depths of the hall with one

glance, but it also felt as though they couldn't look beyond the surface. Multicoloured optical disks whirled around the walls and the floor from time to time, moving freely like a bunch of fish frolicking around, as agile as though they were alive.

A throne carved out of an entire chunk of natural crystal stood atop a platform at the end of the hall, Sharon herself seated on it. Her feet were on the same level as Mordred's chin, and over Richard's head—she was literally lofty. But with her legendary status, no one would think she was lacking in manners whatsoever.

Sharon's golden hair flowed freely, and her long regal dress with a plunging neckline revealed her bare shoulders and much of her snow white bosom. Her complexion was unbelievably fair, and one would have an urge to bite any part of her body if they saw it. Of course, one would choose to lay their teeth upon her full chest if they had a choice, and next would be her face. She seemed seventeen or eighteen at most, with a small face and quiet disposition. The grand mage was the definition of a classic beauty, seated atop the towering crystal throne like a goddess that had just descended.

Those who met her for the first time would totally be unable to associate such a young and beautiful woman with a legendary mage. But even the youngest mage would know that the Deepblue had been around for more than a century.

Her hands were criss-crossed upon her knee, and every single finger was adorned with a long fingernail guard forged from enchanted adamantine, each finger embedded with gems and designs of every colour. The designs on the guards were in fact formed from tiny spells inlaid in the myriad of gems that included rare stones only seen in legends. Those who knew value would be able to see that these guards were all impeccably powerful magical transmitters, or perhaps they were more like godly tools, and Sharon could actually cover all ten of her fingers in them! Her

earrings, necklace, and even the string that she used to tie her hair were magic transmitting equipment similar to the fingernail guards!

The crystal throne was so dazzling that even Richard, a child who knew nothing about it, could tell how precious it was. However, this magic hall itself was worth a hundred times the throne. The crystals built into the walls and floors were actually used by mages for their staffs!

Standing in the magical hall, Richard suddenly felt his range of perception expand substantially, and traces of energy had started to enter his body as though they were flowing along some strange passageway. When the fine energy particles entered his body and were gradually absorbed, he suddenly heard the sound of glass shattering in his consciousness. It was as if some protective screen had been smashed into pieces at that very moment, allowing his perception that was once bound and restricted to dissipate completely.

In the next second, Richard came into contact with a magical ocean! Undercurrents ebbed and flowed in this water void of light, flowing along the seabed, ready to silently devour a gigantic whale at any moment. If Richard fell into this ocean he would instantly be engulfed without a single ripple, but he was standing on its surface at this very moment!

The momentary feeling of confusion immediately made Richard turn pale, and he began to tremble involuntarily. It all felt so real, and it was beyond his abilities to determine if it truly was.

Meanwhile, Mordred and Sharon were having a serious discussion about Richard's tuition fees.

"It is my master's wish that you put your heart and soul into guiding our young master, on account of old time's sake."

"Old time's sake? Yeah, I recall now. That Marquess from your family still hasn't paid me for many of my materials!"

“He has already paid the principal amount, hasn’t he?”

“How about the interest?”

Discussing numbers with a mage was not a wise move at all. Mordred immediately changed the topic, and threw out plan B. “Young master Richard has an exceedingly outstanding innate gift for magic.”

“Hmph, dozens of geniuses approach me to learn magic from me every year! I’ve even rejected three to four clerics.”

With a solemn face, Mordred dealt his trump card. “Our young master has the bloodline of the Archerons, and few adults can compare to the degree of purity of his blood. Well, at least no one else among this generation of Archerons is his match.”

The legendary mage was initially calm, but her eyes suddenly lit up so bright that the entire magical hall twinkled a little, as if she had seen an enormous dragon made of jewels. Although she spoke in a composed manner, anyone would be able to tell that she was just putting on an act. “Then what can I do?”

“You can trample on him any way you wish!” This didn’t sound like something that solemn and old-fashioned Mordred would say. As a matter of fact, these were the exact words of the Marquess, not him, but Mordred maintained a solemn expression even as he said those words. Or perhaps his appearance didn’t convey his emotions.

It was then that Sharon and Mordred both became aware of Richard’s peculiar behaviour.

Sharon looked as though she was in deep thought. “This little chap could actually establish a connection with my magical hall’s magic power reservoir, that isn’t an easy feat. Well... I guess he barely qualifies to learn from me,” she said slowly.

“Of course!” Mordred smiled, but he was thinking otherwise. This was a magical hall constructed entirely out of abyss crystals!

The magical powers here were so strong that even a knight like himself whose only capability were his fighting abilities could detect it. What's so hard about that? This excuse was really too far-fetched.

“However, that is not enough.” Sharon said, “The two planes that Gaton has with him are pretty good. I want 10 years of his profits from either one of them.”

“In plane time?”

“No, Norland time.”

The corner of Mordred's mouth twitched a little, but he eventually nodded. This had already slightly exceeded the baseline that Gaton had set for him, but it was still narrowly acceptable. Norland wasn't the sole plane in this world, but it was one of the top few. The timeflow here was slower than in most secondary planes, and ten years in Norland could be equivalent to centuries elsewhere. The bottom line that the marquess had initially set was already unimaginably generous. This was half of Gaton's earnings that they were talking about, which would inevitably affect his plans for expansion in the future. One must know that Gaton's next goal was to establish his presence in the capital city of the Empire: the legendary city, Faust. In order to establish one's ground in such a place, no matter how abundant the resources prepared were, it would never be too much.

It was only then that Mordred recalled a title that the elites in the Alliance secretly circulated among themselves, one which was prefixed to Sharon's name, ‘Bloodsucking Sharon, indeed...’

Her maxim was widely known as well, “I might not be the strongest, but I will definitely be the wealthiest.”

However, Sharon continued, “I'll help little Gaton a bit during the next prayer to the Eternal Dragon.”

Mordred heaved a sigh of relief. This was unanimous with the

baseline that Gaton had set. Yet he immediately felt a bizarre feeling rise in him. Although this was such a significant matter, both parties had quickly reached a deal at their baselines without probing each other numerous times and the push-and-pull process of haggling over prices.

What chemistry they had!

The most important task had already been successfully accomplished, and Mordred departed immediately. Right before he left, he couldn't help but turn back and take a last glance at Richard, with a complex look in his gaze. When more than a century worth of aggregate profits from a certain plane were stacked together, regardless of what shape or form, anyone would look back at them like that.

Sharon waved gently. Eighteen mages all above level 12 immediately retreated without a noise, leaving her alone with the boy who was straining himself not to get overwhelmed by the magic power. Although his clothes were thoroughly drenched in sweat, Richard still braced himself and didn't collapse. The tenacity that he had been training since his youth was finally revealing its effects.

The legendary mage sitting atop the crystal throne lightly tapped her fingers, and two of the fingernail guards collided with a "ding". As the tides of the magic power reservoir hidden underground slowly came to rest, the rich and never-ending illusions in Richard's mind also vanished. When the tides were all focused upon little Richard, even someone with no talent for magic could display an 'extraordinary' innate gift.

This was a tiny disguise that Mordred definitely saw through, and Sharon had no intention of covering it up. It wasn't that she didn't have more superior and obscure strategies and excuses, just that she was too lazy to use them. No matter how botched a reason was, it was still a reason. Even if Mordred saw through Sharon's tricks, he didn't dare to mention it. That was the crux of the

matter.

Richard calmed his breathing and slowly raised his head to meet Sharon's gaze. He was a little startled; although Sharon was high and mighty, her imposing loftiness was far more powerful and dangerous than the fiercest demon he had ever seen. This woman only looked about 17 or 18, and was so stunningly beautiful with her fair skin and a full chest that one would itch to sink their teeth into. She was going to be his teacher from now on?

"Your father has already sold the next few years of your life to me." The legendary mage used the word 'sold' in a very ambiguous manner, knowing that Richard wouldn't be able to understand it clearly since he didn't have the listening skills of a level 7. Even if he heard it distinctly, he wouldn't understand what it meant for now. While the great magic tutor and the murderous maniac were negotiating over the price, this young man was struggling to endure the tides of the magic power and prevent himself from being washed away, clueless about everything else that was happening.

"From today onwards, you will be my student. You must execute all my orders accurately without fail, regardless of what they are." Sharon's voice was stern and distant.

"Yes." Richard replied. He had already learnt the responsibilities and obligations of an acolyte on the journey here.

Sharon tapped her fingernails together once more. Two powerful mages entered the place and took him away. He maintained his display of respect and humility as her acolyte, not raising his head to look at her because it would be impolite. That's why he didn't notice the strange looks being shot at him from the cold beauty, the look bears gave salmon as they salivated with greed.

It wasn't easy for Sharon to wait until the entire hall cleared out. She might have just erupted into laughter involuntarily moments ago, an unconcealable delight on the legendary mage's pretty little

face as she unrolled an enchanted scroll in one swift motion. The scroll projected an image that formed a three-dimensional magic map, filled with innumerable magic symbols that indicated hundreds of planar coordinates.

Sharon was in high spirits as she scanned through the dozens of dragon signs on the map of the plane. Since she was in a good mood, she decided to pillage a few dragon nests to celebrate the day's events.

“What should I do tonight? Rob a dragon, or rob a dragon, or rob a few dragons?!” The beautiful legendary mage was distressed in her own way.



# Book 1, Chapter 8 - Examination

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The work of art that was the Deepblue's central tower wasn't constructed in the normal way. It was more than thrice the height and twice the width of an ordinary magic tower, adding up to a twelvefold increase in surface area. And this was excluding its large subsidiary building complex! The total of the resources used in constructing it was unimaginable, allowing it to house more than ten thousand people in its premises. With its large population, the Deepblue on its own was on the level of a small city, but to be more specific it was a large monster. The amount of resources sent in and out of it every day was worth tenfold its size.

Sat atop a hill near the sea, the Deepblue had its own harbour to move supplies, docks pulled up from the solid bedrock of the sea using magic. At least three large roads connected to the different entrances to the Deepblue from this port, and fifty to sixty small towns prospered from the trade these roads established.

The Deepblue was situated at the apex of Floe Bay in the northwestern part of the continent, an estuary of two large rivers. The bay itself was as large as an ocean, spanning more than 1500 kilometres from the Starlight Peninsula to the northern Everwinter Mountains. The bay froze over in the winter, leaving only the southernmost parts of the coastline open for business. The Deepblue's own harbour was located near some warm currents, though, so it was ice-free.

The Deepblue was located in a prime location. Transportation was convenient, and it guarded one of the three main roads at the south of this icy continent. The only other option for the grey dwarves and mystical beasts in their attacks was to pass through Sunset Canyon, which was a thousand kilometre detour that forced them through the Thunderlord Stronghold of the Sacred Alliance.

Still, they would rather do that than try and force their way

through Sharon again. War after war with the Deepblue had put them in their place, and the woman was already on par with the most terrifying demons of their legend. When she officially entered level 20 and became a legendary mage, the Deepblue had grown completely peaceful. Even the fierce, brutal, and valiant grey dwarves of the underground didn't dare destroy its serenity, allowing the surrounding lands to prosper.

That was how an old mage that was well into his nineties told the story to Richard. His abilities weren't considered spectacular at level 8, and he was in fact amongst the weakest Richard had ever seen in the Deepblue, but he was extremely good-looking with an alluring voice and an understanding of this land that was second only to Sharon herself. His job was simple; he was to explain the history of the Deepblue to visitors and new acolytes like Richard, something deemed more important than the mana and talent examinations.

One's talent at magic determined how far a mage could travel the various paths of magic in this complicated world, while mana determined whether they could even attempt to become a mage at all. As a hand-picked student of Sharon's, Richard was different from the rest. What normally only took a single day had been extended to three, a challenge not only for him but also for the old mage who had to spread the tower's history over the span of three days.

Many details were missing from the old man's story, and some parts had been intentionally left out. However, one could only choose to accept and learn from the rich vaults of history, or forget about it as a whole. It was all for the sake of knowledge, and Richard had managed to piece together a quite complete image with his blessings.

The three days of brainwashing seemed to be effective nevertheless, as Richard no longer looked as Sharon as an innocent, delicate girl. His desires for her diminished, replaced by

a lack of vocabulary to describe this woman whom even the grey dwarves feared.

Of course those weren't the mage's original intentions, but he wouldn't know how his teachings affected the student either. Everyone knew Richard to be a quiet kid who hardly expressed his feelings, never laughing nor crying despite reprimands and bullying. He did as he was told to the best of his abilities, and there was almost nothing to nitpick about in this ten-year old who did not act like his age.

Richard hadn't seen the sun in three days as his history lessons sped by at lightspeed. The next thing he knew, he was being brought to a special hall that was filled to the brim with alchemic tools and equipment. At least twenty mages were present here, with one main conductor who was the most superior. When Richard tried to use Truth to see through him, all he saw was an appallingly huge flaming ball of magic instead of the mage himself. He was at least level 17, a great mage, strong enough to be appointed as the imperial magician of any kingdom, yet here he was conducting an examination.

Richard removed his clothes, and was tied into a freezing metallic chair with all sorts of ropes and bandages. The conductor placed crystal needles in his body, an excruciating process that the boy endured silently. Just the scale of this part told Richard this examination would be no small matter, but he didn't know the full extent of it yet. The examination for a common acolyte was just the casting of a grade 0 spell on a crystal ball, but these mages treated it like an important experiment, exuding a solemn tidiness and the agility unique to powerful mages.

Richard didn't know Sharon was sitting behind the enchanted one-way wall, supervising the entire process from the comfort of a sofa. One hand held the notes of a legendary mage, while the other sent fruits into her mouth every now and then. Still, nobody could predict someone of her power; she could still control the entire

situation at ease without sound or sight, so it only made sense for the mages in the lounge to put their utmost effort into examining Richard. There was only one master of the Deepblue, and everyone apart from her was a servant or a slave. Most mages here strived to make her happy in order to receive better treatment.

One of the mages walked over to Richard, placing a beaker under his nose and instructing him to inhale all of the mist within. Richard did as told, and felt himself slipping out of consciousness only moments later. A part of him was still awake, however, and aware of what was going on.

Odd sensations started to crawl all over his body, and he heard a voice, “High elemental affinity. Strong with fire, shadows, and divinity. Innate elements... none.”

Almost immediately, agonizing pain shot through Richard’s body, aimed to test his tolerance for elemental destruction which would measure his magic resistance. The same voice announced favourable results a few moments later.

Richard then felt like his consciousness was pierced by a needle, experiencing pain that cut through his very soul. Even unconscious he couldn’t help but writhe, yet with his body tightly bound there was no way to escape from the pain.

“Excellent spiritual force, almost at the level of a genius.” Richard relaxed upon hearing the comment, as he realised that he was still being examined. His results seemed good so far.

The subsequent tests examined the various functions of his body, even his genitalia, which were deemed to have extraordinary potential that could be put to use soon. Overall he fared better here than in magic.

The examination ran for around three hours, and resulted in a twenty page report. Sharon had finished two books of notes through the gruelling process, experimenting with a new magic concept and finishing five kilograms of fruit even as she constantly

monitored their progress.

When Richard woke up, he was told that his overall result was excellent, with no special tendencies. He also possessed decent talent as a fighter, able to advance to level 11 or 12 in the profession in his lifetime. He was pleasantly surprised by his results as he was brought to rest after the long, debilitating torture. He'd been drained of all his energy and strength.

‘There should only be one rank above excellent, right?’ he deduced, thinking that one remaining rank would only be granted under certain rare conditions. Little did he know that there were a total of five ranks above excellent in that examination, namely genius, outstanding, legendary, unique, and Sharon.

# Book 1, Chapter 9 - Numbers

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Sharon was sat lazily on her sofa in the monitoring room, reviewing the report. Truth be told she couldn't be more clear on the data it contained, but she wanted to review it nonetheless. It showed her approval of the mages, and was also a test of their ability.

"Pretty balanced in all fields, without any obvious strengths or flaws. He has passable mana, and his build isn't bad. With those well-defined abs and hood flexibility he should last a long while... Well, I can look at that further when he matures. Is this all?" Sharon raised her head from the report, pressing the grand mage.

The mage shuddered under her intense and threatening gaze. He chose to ignore the racy words Sharon muttered under her breath, answering in a respectful tone, "It's the most comprehensive examination we can conduct for now, rounding up to 16,000 coins. Everything we could find is already on the report, and we didn't manage to detect any other talents yet."

The word 'genius' was inadequate to describe someone who could reach a stunning level 18 as a mage, but Sharon seemed to think otherwise. Her brows furrowed in perplexion, "All he can advance to is level 18? How useless!" The 'useless' level 18 mage's sincere and humble smile didn't falter even as he listened to her words.

"This can't be. His Archeron bloodline is more pure than even Gaton's. It's odd for him not to have any other talents, is it a collision with his silvermoon elf lineage?"

"The Archeron bloodline is of a superior grade, and we don't have the ability to test his bloodline talents yet."

"Nonsense!" Sharon berated, "I clearly remember there are at least six ways to test the talent of superior bloodlines, even for the best of the best. Do I have to remind you just how important a

superior bloodline is? What in the hell are you idiots doing, am I wasting my money on maggots? If he has a chance of possessing a powerful bloodline ability, you should know to give your all in the examination. Forget the price, just test him, am I clear?"

"The cheapest method will cost more than 600,000 coins," the mage answered, unaffected by Sharon's outburst.

"Oh? Alright then, forget it."

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All these discussions remained unknown to Richard, who lost himself in dreamland after the day of torture. He'd returned to the village in his dreams, once again carrying the breadfruit he knew all too well home. He saw their little house in the distance, his mother waiting for him at the entrance. The savoury fragrance of pie wafted up his nose, telling him it wouldn't be the bland fruits teasing his palate tonight, and that newfound happiness seemed to give him a sudden burst of energy as he ran towards his home like never before. Elaine smiled at him.

Then she went back into the cottage all of a sudden, and tongues of flames started to lick the windows.

Richard shot up and screamed, wanting to throw himself into the fire before noticing the room he was in. His sleepwear was drenched in sweat, and he took long, deep breaths in an attempt to calm himself down. He took his time examining his surroundings, to realise he was lying in an extravagant bed big enough to support five or six people. The rest of the room was extremely large as well. Richard only had to scan the area once for precise details to start appearing in his vision.

The room alone was larger than their entire cottage back in Rooseland, measuring sixty by fifty feet while being about twenty feet tall as well. It made him feel like a lone boat in a colossal ocean, puzzling him as to why it only accommodated one person. He pondered for a little while more before getting off the bed and

observing everything that was present in the room. It had been a month since the nightmarish fire, a month of him forcing himself to forget whatever had happened. It was no doubt naive of him to believe that forgetting it would let his mother return, but even if he was aware of this he couldn't help but submit to this belief, even worship it.

The room was furnished lavishly, the ornaments and furniture characteristic of mages and aristocrats. Richard realised he received numbers and data on whatever he focused his vision on, accurate to two decimal spots. This was the second level of the Truth ability he'd received from the enlightenment ceremony: Precision. He'd unlocked it during the examination, where he also felt the lurking power of the third and fourth levels. They would allow him to analyse the body compositions of various organisms, and appraise different materials. However, he did not know when these abilities would be triggered.

Even now he was unsure of the true use of this blessing, only finding himself drowning in wave upon wave of numbers. Thousands of numbers emerged out of literally everything he saw, starting to give him hallucinations. One chair alone had up to 111 numbers, explaining its length, its width, its surface area, so on and so forth. If he wished to he could even increase them thousandfold, by examining say each fibre of the cloth draping the chair, or the microscopic scales of the leather that made the armrest. Both these things were tough and durable, like they were from the skin of some dragon.

However, living in this world of numbers was miserable, and the young boy felt his head throbbing from dizziness. Thankfully his enhanced intelligence came into effect, and he classified and sorted all these numbers and data. He quickly eliminated what was useless, leaving only a few important fields. This took Richard the entire night, cutting down everything pointless and making sure the important bits remained.



The sun soon rose, marking Richard's first day as an official apprentice of Sharon's.

The main portion of the first day involved bringing Richard around and letting him gain an understanding of the Deepblue. He was shown the public areas and restricted zones, being informed about how to apply for various supplies and the people he had to look for if he needed any help. He was also given general safety precautions, and given a tour of his personal region.

Indeed. Fitting of the Precision ability, region was an accurate term to describe his personal space. He had his own magic lab complex, with one common lab and six specialised ones. There was the enormous bedroom, and the living area which was made up of eleven rooms with different uses, something that surprised him. One of them was meant just to store hats and clothes when all of his belongings could fit into a single small suitcase! And most of those were prepared by Gaton's instruction at that, the fires started by his mother's suicide having burnt down all the magic books and other souvenirs of his childhood. Indeed, the flames from a powerful shaman burning themselves were more powerful than a dragon's breath.

There were storage areas as well, also divided into several rooms. Richard was beyond loss as he stood in the spacious area with tall shelves, unsure how one could even fill such a huge place. It was big enough to store winter supplies for his entire village!

The guide was a youthful acolyte, her voice as sweet as her appearance. She'd dropped her name multiple times over the course of the tour, hinting for Richard to find her whenever he needed help. She'd even emphasised that 'whenever', squinting her pretty eyes into cute crescents. Richard hadn't understood what 'could be put to use soon' and 'outstanding potential' meant in his report under the body section yet, but he would in due time.

They bumped into a bustle of mages along the way, most making way for Richard and some even bowing to him. His abilities let him

see that their eyes were on the symbol on the fresh robe he was wearing, a sign of status indicating he was hand-picked by Sharon herself. It was then that it dawned upon him; his status wasn't to be trifled with in the Deepblue.

The official, systemised lessons began the next day, and Richard felt his head spin again when he received the long timetable for it.

The Deepblue had unconventional practices, away from the norms of the magic world. Foundational magic courses, for example, were split up into magic philosophy, the system of the world, planar organism study, planar geography, mathematics, world theory, composition study, material sciences, planar geometry, spatial geometry, the history of races, the analysis of living beings, and so on and so forth. These subjects were divided further the deeper one went, and one could learn their entire life.

The Deepblue's curriculum placed much emphasis on magic philosophy, and this was where Richard's lessons truly started.

# Book 1, Chapter 10 - Start From the Top

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The lesson was held in an enormous classroom that could accommodate 300 people at a time. There was an elevated stage in the centre, with a handful of spacious and comfy-looking seats, with the rest being crammed into the sides shamefully. Richard was pointed to the centre stage as he entered the classroom, warranting attention from his classmates and discomfort on his part. The students were of various ages, from seven-year-old kids to octogenarians. This was a semi-public lecture, attendance being open to any mages who'd given their services to Deepblue for a year. The central seats were reserved for Sharon's personal apprentices, which was why Richard became the centre of attraction and jealousy the moment he sat down.

There were two others here, a girl and boy at levels 6 and 5 respectively in spite of looking just two or three years older than Richard himself. Richard was the thirteenth of Sharon's apprentices, and only three remained in the Deepblue to date. The rest had begun their journeys across the continents and planes, the best one already dominating an entire plane himself.

The classroom's door swung open again just as Richard sat down, and a bald, short, and stout mage walked in. This was their professor, Popovich. At level 16, he wasn't anything in the continent or the Deepblue, but Popovich wasn't someone known for his magic abilities anyway. He was instead renowned for his contribution to world theory.

The professor looked less than average, with a humorously large button nose and rounded jaw. However, it wasn't easy to attend a lecture in the Deepblue, and everyone in the classroom was here to propel themselves further in the magic world. The entire class quieted down in a few moments.

"The world of magic exists with reality as its base. When you observe the world, you do not hear and see true reality, instead

only experiencing sensations sent to your mind through your perception. This process is unavoidable, but the perceived world and the real world have so many differences...

“How, then, do we limit the chance of error? It’s through the way you think! In other words, the way a mage thinks decides the kind of world they perceive!” He paused, waiting for the confused or fascinated students and mages to take down notes before continuing, “This lesson is not going to teach you formidable spells at level 8 or 9, that’s something even I can’t do.”

The classroom was dead silent, no one appreciating Popovich’s humour. He could only scratch his head awkwardly at the reaction of these serious and pragmatic students, muttering “what a boring bunch” in defeat under his breath before returning to the lesson. “Alright, let’s get straight to the topic. I am here to teach you how to think.

“Don’t belittle this subject. As insignificant as it seems, your school of thought is the foundation for everything that comes further on in your life. It can ultimately decide your accomplishments in the world of magic. The right train of thought will bring you closer to the truth of the world, allowing you to make wise and calculated decisions at crucial moments. It will shield you from ignorance, and decisions that you will regret your entire life. It will also decide crucial factors in your experiments, or your choice of spells in a battle.

“Simply put, you have to start from the top. Always remember this: the world before yourself. You need to know the world to know yourself. If you only act like a certain person in this tower who puts themselves before everything, you will only have a myopic view of things. How can a sparrow compare to an eagle? Such thinking is utter foolishness, and will only limit your future accomplishments!” Popovich only began the official lesson after verbally attacking ‘a certain fellow’.

“The basis of everything is origin force. It’s the foundation of the

world, and something that grows alongside it. It's a majestic power that we haven't been able to harness till date. We can, however, treat it as a foundation; the foundation of our world and possibly many others.

“The power of laws acts as the skeletal structure of the world, its various planes the flesh filled in between. These laws are far greater than planes, but still use these planes as a foundation. Every plane is an embodiment of one or more laws, and the more laws a plane can bear the greater it is, the higher its status in the world. Planes that bear complex laws, like Norland's, are considered superior planes, also known as prime planes.

“So I suppose you lot understand by now that laws and planes integrate into one whole. You need to follow the laws of the world to grow in strength, and even if you're someone strong you WILL face punishment if you disregard them. If you wish to change or eliminate the basic laws of a plane, you need to be ready to battle the entirety of that plane!

“The only possibility, thus, is to work with laws that branch out of the basic laws of the plane, the so-called derived laws. You have some hope in this field, but that too will only remain just that, hope. Miracles occur, but don't expect them to happen to you. The stronger ones may think about using or challenging the derived laws of the world, but only fools would think of touching the basic laws.

“The laws of a plane determine its fundamental characteristics, and the plane's power system. Some impossible day in the future, one of you might cross planes in attempted conquest. If and when that happens, your primary objective should be to analyse the derived laws of the plane and its power system. That will let you adjust your battle methods to the plane, allocating resources and exploiting the environment instead of being restricted by it.

“Speaking of, there's one essential thing throughout the process of conquest. Do you know what it is?” Popovich paused for water.

He'd spoken quickly and at length, so he poured an entire jar of magically purified water into his mouth before growling out, "The Dragon of Eternity and Time!"

The Dragon of Eternity and Time, the Eternal Dragon, had unprecedented status in the world. It was above the many gods, its powers incredible and unfathomable. The Eternal Shrine was pretty much the most important location in the entire continent, because it was the only place where one could communicate with the Dragon. Its position was fixed, unaffected by changes in time and space.

The Eternal Shrine had existed from way before the first records of civilisation. The magic of all the races and in all regions of Norland was heavily influenced by the Eternal Dragon, and it was the Dragon's guidance that a weak race like the humans whose only strength was their fertility could advance to become a magic civilisation that stood up to the elves and dragonblood gnomes. It wasn't just the three big human empires. The other races, too, were influenced by the Dragon, the capitals of the six empires on the continent being established on ruins or relics from the Eternal Dragon itself.

"The Eternal Dragon is an archaic creature that surpasses laws themselves. It has left its mark on thousands of planes, and when you enter a new plane your ultimate goal is to find the trace it has left behind in that plane. It may be a female dragon, an egg, or even faeces, but as long as you find its traces you will be able to understand the laws of the plane clearly. It will allow you to leap forward in strength! Compared to the Eternal Dragon, the so-called gods are just parasites leeching off the laws of the planes. Those who control lesser laws are considered weaker, and the opposite is true as well."

"The world is that simple. Start from the top, and work your way down!" Popovich's face was flushed from exasperation, enough to worry someone that he just might be blown to pieces by chaotic

elements the very next second. But his voice continued to reverberate, “The origin, the world, the laws of the planes, and mana. Simply put, they are all parts of a whole. Once you find the correct train of thought, you will find yourself standing on the horns of the Eternal Dragon, looking at the myriad of planes from above. The sword saints and even those with legendary power are but dust in your eyes in that moment. Other than Master Sharon, of course, she is the boss, the special one!”

Finally, Popovich rubbed his chubby hands together and spat out every single word with all the determination he could muster, “Your thinking dictates everything!”

Every word rammed into Richard’s mind like a hammer, making him fuzzy. It wasn’t because of his booming voice; the professor had used a technique akin to a mana shock that suppressed the minds of the students with his power as a great mage.

The bell rang at the moment everyone started to recover from dizziness. The lesson for the day had ended. “That’s all I have to say for today. Let’s curse a certain person in this tower together! Dismissed!”

Richard was unable to calm down for a long time after the lesson. He read through all the books Popovich had prescribed like he was possessed, only snapping out of it at dawn. It was like Popovich had opened an unknown door for him, revealing some of the world’s secrets. It was like the first time he’d opened the Codex back in the cottage.

# Book 1, Chapter 11 - The First Spell

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The next day's lesson was still magic philosophy, but the lecturer was a level 17 great mage named Riley, the 'certain fellow' from Popovich's lesson. The man was lean, wearing a pair of golden magic glasses and dressed meticulously from head to toe. His gaze was deep and wise, looking like he'd already seen beyond the facade of the world.

With him behind the lecture, the class was still as quiet as could be. A level 17 mage was on the verge of becoming a grand mage, and that advancement could take anywhere from an instant to eternity. One had to know that the extra grade 8 spell slot a level 17 mage possessed allowed them to be far superior in battle to a level 16 mage. This was something even a child would know.

The advantage extended to lower level spells as well. While grade 7 and below spells wouldn't be as useful in that level of battle, they would still give the level 17 mage an advantage. This was why Riley perfected many aspects when he first advanced to level 17, unable to care less about the affairs of insignificant idiots, let alone talk about them.

Standing behind the lectern, Riley felt good. At least in that moment, in that classroom, he was the most superior; the one who had control over everything. It'd really be perfect if he wasn't reminded of Sharon.

Riley's voice was gentle but not soft, ringing in the ears of all the students at the same volume, "Everything has its foundation, like the world is built on origin force and planes and laws rely on each other. We and the other races are beings that live on the various planes, and though we're minute we aren't insignificant! There are no two similar souls in this world, not similar people. So then, what is the point of our existence? It is to comprehend the world, to become stronger and gain resources which in turn gives us freedom. We live in a world where might makes right, and the



basic regulations of the world can decide most of our fates here. Try to break them, and you'll be destroyed before you can even break any of the derived laws."

Most students nodded in agreement, the point resonating even more so with the older ones.

Today's lessons were much more interactive than the previous day's, with spiritual force being pushed into their bodies. Riley smiled at their positive reactions, explaining without a hurry, "Grand mages can feel the derived laws of the plane, and those with legendary might will be able to understand the basic laws. How many of us here can actually reach such levels? Even geniuses fall.

"Yes, I can tell you what the world is made of, and what the laws of the planes are, but this is all irrelevant because anything is possible in this world of magic as long as you have great power. Where does this power come from, then? From your understanding of yourself, from exploiting the environment around you. Everyone is complicated, and it might take you your entire life to understand yourself. You have to be grounded, increasing your power with your self as the root. Start from the bottom, and move up to the top; go from yourself to the world. This is how you'll control your destiny!"

Riley waved a hand, and a projection of a human body flashed in front of him. He pointed at various parts of the projection and began to explain the core content of the lesson, "Power isn't something complex, but it's not as simple as having more spell slots. Though we all know that three level 8 spell slots are definitely stronger than two, we have other factors to consider as well. Overall, a person's power can be categorised into 4 major classes: Their attributes, their equipment, their abilities, and their bloodline.

"There's also intelligence, but that varies from person to person and you'll have to work on that yourself. I won't go into that, so

let's start from your attributes.

“So, what is spiritual force?”

Richard gained a lot from this class. For the first time ever he learnt that spiritual force came from the soul, and magic came from mana. Fighters accrued power by training their physical bodies, while clerics borrowed the power of the gods they served. All legendary beings, regardless of their original path, would start to borrow the power of laws, the more power they could get from laws the more powerful they were.

At the end of the lesson, Riley did not fail to make a conclusion that was on par with his elegance, “Don't be greedy for unrealistic goals. Always stay grounded. What you should do is to take one step at a time in your path to power, using the increased lifespan from that extra power to grow even more. So... know yourself, know the environment, learn how to distribute resources, and exploit your power the best you can. The more powerful you get, the more influence every action of yours has. The difference between level 17 and level 16 mages isn't as small as you'd think...”

The next professor, Philip, added another line of thought to the broth before Richard could completely digest what he'd been given already. He drew a circle in the air and cut through it with a line, making the left side red and right side blue.

“There are tons of mysteries in the world. But can we know all of them? This is where opinions start to diverge; some believe they can, and some not. The former group includes most mages while the latter is mostly worshippers and clerics who believe only the gods can do so.” He'd cut the circle into two exact halves, not for the ratio but to show that he wouldn't make a stand for the correct view, staying neutral in his introduction of the topic.

After he explained the contrasting views of whether the infinities of the world could be broken up, he also talked about a dozen alternative views. Richard and the rest didn't really understand

what was going on, thinking about how useful these things would be since they wouldn't help in increasing mana.

But, of course, no one raised any questions about that. Technically the difference between levels 17 and 18 was just one spell slot. One grade 9 spell slot, that is. So not only did nobody question Philip— despite the content being... slightly unrealistic— everyone in the classroom listened beyond attentively. Not one in ten mages could be so lucky, even in their entire lifetime, to be able to attend a lesson conducted by a grand mage.

A dazed Theodore stood behind the lectern on the fourth day, similarly drawing a circle and splitting it. The only difference was, the line started in a different position. The red of mystery occupied most of the circle, leaving the blue to be a thin strip.

“The world is profound, we can't possibly know everything, only the gods are all-knowing...”

Richard only learnt afterwards that Theodore wasn't a mage. He was instead a cleric around level 16 or 17. The Deepblue was a world of mages, so it was rather strange to have someone divine here. What's more, Theodore wasn't of one faith. He worshipped three different gods, somehow not having their faiths clash with each other. It allowed him to cast divine spells from three systems, giving him power surpassing clerics at the same level. But as Richard thought about it, and with prior knowledge he gained from various books, he realised that the only way to have three or more faiths was to cheat.

He could cheat the gods? And three of them at that? This fact alone told Richard that Theodore was no simple man.

On the fifth day, Teslifa did the same thing with the circle and the line, and when the outcome was almost all blue Richard knew immediately that he was a mage. One that believed in agnosticism. Yet, such a precise and quick judgement did not help much.

On the sixth day, Master Fuchsia pointed at a bunch of irregular

numbers and said, “When you see beauty in these numbers, you’ll have completed half your journey in mathematics.” Master Komu wanted the students to see numbers in a series of complicated and beautiful three dimensional images on the seventh. The intention was to abstract numbers with aesthetics.

Richard then fell into a cycle, trying his hardest to see beauty in numbers and numbers in beautiful images.

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A month passed in the blink of an eye, and Richard only learnt insignificant theory and knowledge that mostly wasn’t related to magic or spellcasting at all. Many of the teachers even contradicted each other, presenting large amounts of information built around four specific keywords: Sharon, special, boss, and dictator. It left a huge impact on Richard.

Another thing the teachers liked, from Popovich to Teslifa was to say ‘the world is that simple.’ It seemed like the motto of the various schools of thought in the Deepblue.

The world may be simple, but Richard was growing more confused than ever. Nonetheless, he’d had his own gains too. In some serendipity, he had placed his first foot into magic.

He’d learnt how to create a fireball.

# Book 1, Chapter 12 - Fireball, Fireball

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Put precisely, Richard had learnt to cast a grade 1 fireball.

Fireball was a legendary grade 3 spell, just as important as Sharon herself for mages level 1 to 3. The spell was a unique existence with many myths and proverbs floating around it, the most common of which was that a mage who could only cast fireballs wasn't a good mage. Regardless of that proverb's views, though, its very spread acknowledged how unique this spell was. Fireball was simply far too important for mages at and below level 3. It allowed mages under level 6 to play a role in the battlefield as well, making it the first spell one would learn when they advanced.

The spell took three seconds to cast, and could be launched at a target up to thirty metres away. There was a 10 metre area of effect where enemies would face slight burns, and a direct hit would eliminate a normal level 5 warrior. The strongest of grade 3 spells, the ability to target more than one person ensured that warriors who had to target individuals wouldn't meet a good end at the hands of a mage.

The spell's might had sparked a lot of research by low level mages once upon a time, directly instigating the creation of that proverb. At the pinnacle of research into it, a level 8 mage had once stated that it was possible to kill even a grand mage with five fireballs.

This came from a study that altered the course of magic history, making the fireball a popular subject for people to study and discuss. The study, originally titled, 'Probing Into The Compounding Of The Fireball's Power,' had concluded that even a level 18 mage wouldn't be able to survive a head on collision with twelve fireballs at the same time. In the most extreme of cases, if the mage was inside a sealed space that reflected the explosive power back onto him, only five would be required to finish him off.

This study had actually gone unnoticed for a while, until that particular busybody had changed the study title to ‘A Grand Mage Can Be Killed By Only Five Fireballs.’ It enraged the grand mages; the people were downplaying their strength, but the logic of this study was detailed and sound. The calculations were accurate and the conclusion was proper despite the fact that it remained theoretical.

No grand mage would allow themselves to be put into a sealed space and have five fireballs strike them. They had great amounts of spiritual force and mana, being unaffected by low-grade magic spells like fireballs. These effects could only be brought about in a controlled environment. Still, weaker mages and those who couldn’t use magic alike couldn’t care less about these facts. The only thought they had was that a fireball could slay a grand mage.

This made the grand mages furious, but they were helpless as well. It would be stupid to argue the idea of being hit by five fireballs at the same time. This school of thought caused some hindrance to the progress of magic, so a grand mage ended up taking it upon himself to lead a team of tens of mages and hundreds of acolytes in intense research. Three years later, their report concluded that a mage who spent too much time on studying the fireball would face difficulties in advancing in the future. The fireball could very well be the last spell they mastered!

The paper sent the mages who excelled in the spell into a clamour. Countless criticisms were levied against the data used in the study, mentioning that the collated statistics were illogical and full of errors. Still, the weak mages performing research on the spell couldn’t cross-reference the data with their own findings, and they didn’t have the resources to get their own. Thus, everyone ended up having to cite this study in their own theories, turning messy data into fact along the way. If someone’s theories didn’t tally with this data, then their experiment had to have been wrong.

No matter how much this caused these fireball mages to fume, they eventually accepted the 'truth.' They themselves had been scared by the possibility of their research affecting their own advancement as well; while the grand mage wasn't particularly famous, he was still a grand mage after all.

This ended up changing the situation around the fireball again, easing up the development of magic in the long run. Still, the process had proven that group size didn't matter as much as the levels of the mages.

Fireball was fireball, in the end. No matter what people thought of it, the spell itself was special. Even a level 20 grand mage, in a battlefield against tens of thousands of soldiers, would likely start off by tossing a few fireballs. Instant casting, silent incantations, upgrades to the precision, a slowing effect... All sorts of research had been performed into the spell, making it the best spell below grade 6.

The mage who wrote the original theory was forgotten by the time the fad had come to a close, labelled the Five Fireball Mage and banished to the annals of history...

Having browsed through the vast information resources of the Deepblue, Richard understood the complicated history behind the spell.

The only things related directly to magic in an entire month of study was the various schools of magic, basic meditation, and beginner spells. This had only taken up three days out of the whole month as well.

The professor teaching beginner magic was also a grand mage, so he only taught them to stabilise the elements as well as the theory behind spellcasting. Incantations, hand techniques, and other practical portions were mentioned briefly and left for self-study. The month of schooling had shown Richard that the professors focused on theory, delving into it more. Practical lessons like

spellcasting were brushed over, and the students were left to figure things out on their own.

A different place would have labelled them frauds or low-level, but in the Deepblue theory was put up on a pedestal; good research was a shortcut to Sharon's delight. Besides, other than the old history teachers everyone else was at least a great mage at level 14. That alone crushed all forms of suspicion.

Richard had learnt fireball from a magic text he'd received. It wasn't that hard to cast or control, the main reason for it being a grade 3 spell being that it required a lot of mana. He'd practised after the lessons each day, both meditating and training his casting. He'd taken a total of fifteen days to master all six grade 0 spells, gaining an understanding of the lower end of the magic system as he looked for his first spell.

It was there that his blessing of wisdom had unconsciously been put to play. He'd discovered the grade 3 fireball was extremely easy to cast, much more than even some grade 1 spells. Thousands of years of research and study had brought the spell close to perfection, making casting it effective and efficient. Richard was still a youth, and his curiosity could not be satiated. When he applied everything he'd learnt, and simulations showed that he already had the mana needed to cast the spell, his heart had sped up tremendously.



# Book 1, Chapter 13 - Expedition

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The world was already digital in little Richard's eyes. He'd moved past his initial confusion, starting to make use of the numbers coming from Precision. He could already sense the total mana of an average level 1 mage, and he'd set that to be ten. With that as a reference point, he was at about eight points. Little did he know of the endless possibility resulting from his actions, of the start of the digitisation of magic.

A fireball required fifteen points of mana to cast, while a general grade 3 spell needed about 20. This was why it outshone the numerous other spells of its grade; it had a lower mana requirement, was more formidable, and was easier to cast to boot. However, even in this process there were a lot of points which wasted mana, and depleting all of one's mana in one go would injure any mage. Richard instinctively realised that there was still a lot of improvements to be made, and after countless hours of burning the midnight oil he'd actually discovered that the mana consumption could be dropped to just eight points. If the cast was perfect, the drop in power wasn't as massive either; only dropping to ten points from fifteen. Such a fireball was far more cost effective for the damage it did, and was overwhelmingly more powerful than other grade 1 spells which had a maximum damage rating of 5.

Curiosity is the lust of the mind. Richard tried to cast a fireball the very next night, succeeding on the first try. The bundle of flames was evidently smaller than average, but it was a more vivid scarlet as well. He watched as it flew slowly towards a steel doll 25 metres away, so nervous that his heart almost stopped beating.

The fireball exploded suddenly upon contact, the flames spreading everywhere and sending a burst of hot air Richard's way. The scorching heat and the explosion dealt a double blow to the doll, deforming it and burning it with magic flames. The doll

was equivalent to a warrior with plate armour covering half their body, so one could imagine how this fireball would've killed someone of that level.

Success! This was the first spell that little Richard had casted from birth, and he was drowned in immense joy that very moment. He wanted to leap up and cheer, but his legs gave way beneath him and he slowly collapsed against a wall. His insides felt empty all of a sudden, as if no part of his body would listen to him anymore. It was difficult to even lift a finger.

This was the price he'd paid to cast a spell that depleted all his mana in one go. He couldn't even bring himself to meditate, only able to quietly wait for his passive mana regeneration. Precision told him it would take 3 hours and 6 minutes to recover a single point of mana, the bare minimum before he could stand and meditate.

Richard was immensely bored as he waited for his mana and energy to recover. He started to wonder about everything he'd learnt of magic so far, since there was nothing else for him to do. He discovered that a higher level of spiritual force would enable a caster to use less mana to cast a spell, because spiritual force enabled one to be more meticulous and detailed in manipulating their mana. Beyond the actual collating of the elements to cast the spell, spiritual force was required for a lot of processes.

Richard felt like the fireball spell could be improved greatly. There were at least 16 points in the spellcasting process that could be improved— four of them involved cutting down the mana consumption, three allowed him to increase the spell's power, and so on and so forth. Weighing the trade-offs, he first chose to reduce the mana consumption.

The next half hour was full of dry calculation, making Richard realise the importance of mathematics. He finally managed to improve on one of those 16 points, dropping the mana consumption of the fireball down to 7 without reducing its power.

This would allow him to remain standing after casting a spell, even jogging a few steps instead of being limp and weak like he was now. His Precision ability allowed him to assess the condition of his own body, so with the proper reference point he'd be able to monitor his spiritual force and mana in the future.

Little Richard's heart was now bursting with delight for the first time. He simply couldn't wait to recover his mana and attempt to improve on his fireball, seeing whether he really had done it. The joy of exploration and discovery was so immense that it allowed the boy to see the first ray of light in months of darkness, helping him realise how miraculous and complicated the world was. Magic was so vast that even an entire lifetime wouldn't suffice to explore just a single corner of it.

Eventually his mana climbed back to a full point, and Richard struggled his way into the meditation room. He slurped down a mana potion and started to mediate, recovering his mana in a few hours. He rushed out impatiently as soon as that was done, launching another ball of fire towards the damaged steel doll.

Richard's mana was drained rapidly as the fireball took shape in his hands. The ball of flames trembled and flickered, but eventually launched itself out of his hands and went flying towards the doll.

The experiment had succeeded once more. Richard's method for improvement was both feasible and effective, just that his zeal caused a tiny flaw in the casting process that slightly increased the mana he consumed. He was paralysed once more, but fortunately the mana potion's effects weren't done yet so he could recover quickly. He only ended up sitting down for an hour. Richard spent the entirety of that hour in calculations.

It was already daybreak by the time he got up. The day's lesson was in mathematics, and this was the first time Richard was this serious. He wasn't sick in the mind like Fuchsia, but he could finally see the beauty in the endless numbers. He'd truly

experienced the function of mathematics, and was now living in a digital world.

Richard didn't feel lethargic at any point in the day's lessons. He found it easy to understand the contents of the lectures, but looking at the other students staring blankly or being deep in thought he realised it wasn't as simple as it was for him. It seemed like the blessing of wisdom was rather useful.

The young acolyte who brought him around the Deepblue the first time around was waiting by Richard's gates when he returned. She greeted him with a sweet smile, passing him a silver badge for the end of the month. She said it was for his income and expenditure this month, and he could examine it in the laboratory forge or just by using mana to view the content within.

The young lady had a pleasant appearance and a charming bearing. She exuded a gentle and beautiful aura just standing there quietly, but Richard only stole a glance at her as he thanked her and walked into his region.

As the two lustrous heavy gates closed slowly in front of her, the young girl stamped her feet fiercely. She had a strong urge to pry those gates open with magic, but she knew that they were forged with antimagic metal and were protected by spells. Even a level 6 disjunction spell wouldn't be able to deal with that door, forget her strongest spell that was merely a level 2 acid arrow.

The metal gates alone cost a considerable amount, let alone the lands behind them. Land was at a premium in the Deepblue, and even if what lay behind these gates was empty it would be considered priceless.

"You! You've already seen me twice, but why didn't you even ask for my name?" The young girl muttered angrily to herself. She immediately recalled that Richard had just turned ten according to the data in his profile. He was too old for someone who'd just started his magic journey, but too young to be a man. She could

only shake her head helplessly and depart with regret. What was she to do? If Richard really possessed the abilities of a grown man, it would be too late to take action, and she would never stand a chance.

In the Deepblue, competition was at every turn.

## Book 1, Chapter 14 - Sharon's Delight

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Richard walked straight into his forge, inserting the metal badge into a counter. A clear projection appeared in mid-air, containing a record of his finances for the month. It took five points of mana to activate the badge, and Richard would rather have that come from the magic crystals on the counter than himself. He wanted to spend all his mana on actually learning magic instead.

Seeing the first line of the bill. Richard was dumbstruck. This was what was written there: Replacement of 1 Magic Doll— 1600 gold.

This was the steel doll he'd practised magic on. He'd seen it had been replaced on his way, but that puny thing was worth 1600 coins?! Richard couldn't grasp the concept of currency very well, but he knew that his mother's lifetime savings after living in Rooseland Village for ten years only amounted to a dozen or so coins. The fur of a gigantic demon was worth only about 1 or 2 coins in the city, yet fully-grown hunters had to risk their lives in order to hunt them. Perhaps the village chief, who was the wealthiest of them all, had a couple hundred coins saved up, but even that would be accumulated from his pay and other rewards throughout the time he spent in the army.

He had only launched two fireballs, and had already blown 1600 coins? He began to recall every single detail about the steel doll, and realised that apart from its defense capabilities being almost identical to a standard half-body armoured warrior, there wasn't anything outstanding about it. Little did he know that this was the very reason for its cost.

The average magic doll had a point or two of energy level discrepancy from the real deal, but the steel dolls of the Deepblue were accurate to a tenth of a point. It cost nearly 30 times of a difference to increase about one energy level of accuracy. The energy level being spoken of here was a significant concept in the

world of magic, referring to the amount of energy possessed by a standard grade 1 magic missile.

Beads of cold sweat rolled down Richard's forehead without end, the gigantic numbers suffocating him. Rooseland was also part of the Sacred Alliance, and its currency was interlinked with that of Deepblue. 1600 coins was a debt that he would never be able to repay in his lifetime. He didn't like owing debts; a trait that he had inherited from his mother. Elena's reluctance to be in debt to anyone put an immense psychological pressure on the boy that almost made him faint, and it was extremely difficult for him to calm down and slowly look down the list. As he'd expected, the prices of the rest of the goods he'd consumed were shockingly high as well. That one mana potion he'd used cost nearly 500 coins!

He thought about the bottles of potion in his potion room in the storage area, and saw things from a different perspective. These potions were labeled with their properties and directions for use, most of which were supplementary potions which raised magical awareness and compatibility, and they were designed for recovery purposes and so on. They were mainly used by mages to expedite their training process.

Richard was gaining a greater understanding of the world beyond the mountains after arriving in the Deepblue. Even back in Azan he'd been appalled by the high prices of expensive items, but compared to in the Deepblue they were so much simpler and cheaper that they were practically free. A single mana potion was worth a mere 10 coins in Azan, but in the Deepblue it cost 50 times that.

However, what little Richard didn't know was that the mana recovery potions sold in the Azan market only lasted for 3 hours, and they only afforded half a fold of increase in recovery rate. The one he'd used would last an entire 24 hours, and doubled the recovery rate on top. That made for a total of a 32 times increase, and consequently the price was fifty times as much.

Refining better and better potions was harder the farther one went, just like in any other profession. It cost more with every advancement, a pyramid of power that was prevalent across practically all fields. This concept that little Richard had just learnt allowed him to interpret this principle from another angle, and apply it across physical boundaries.

At the end of the first page, Richard saw his total expenditure for the month: 18000 coins.

His income was listed on the second page, and there was only a single line at the top. The item was listed as a tuition subsidy, and its monetary value was 30,000 coins. As he was browsing through the expenses, Richard had already gotten used to the large numbers. Yet, the huge value of the subsidy still caught him by surprise.

Just a day ago, even 30 coins was a huge sum that little Richard had never set his eyes on before, much less 30,000. He didn't know how he could spend it either. Life in the mountains revolved around self-sufficiency, and apart from materials which had to be purchased, Richard couldn't even think about what else he could spend the money on.

But 30,000 coins... "It's probably enough to lay the floor of this laboratory!" Richard couldn't help but think this to himself as he gazed at the vast smelting laboratory, still stuck in a dizzy state.

With just a glance across every corner of the laboratory, Richard obtained an exact answer. If he used all his Sacred Alliance coins to lay the floor, it would require 333,300 of them.

Little Richard shook his head forcefully to rid his brain of these distressing numbers. 30,000 or 300,000, there wasn't any difference; they were all just huge sums beyond his imagination.

And the subsidy of 30,000 coins was just the beginning. The second page still contained several empty columns, just the names of the main categories without any income. In the future, these



would be his sources of income. However, Richard found the last column rather difficult to understand. Sharon's Delight... What kind of income was that?

After calming himself down, little Richard immediately realised that a subsidy of 30,000 coins actually wasn't much. There were countless places in the Deepblue for him to spend his money on, and it was only the first month. He'd spent much of his time having lessons, and with only a week of practising magic where he'd only consumed a pathetic amount of materials and supplies, he'd still expended close to 18,000 coins. It would be great if he could just maintain equilibrium next month, and this same 30,000 definitely wouldn't be enough a month later.

Richard didn't put much thought into it. Although he still couldn't quite grasp the concept of currency, at least he knew that every single day spent learning in the Deepblue consumed huge volumes of resources. Even though he had the subsidy of 30,000 coins, he knew that it came with a price. It looked like Marquess Gaton had used up a significant amount of resources to allow him to enter the Deepblue, but this was a chance his mother had sacrificed her life for.

The history and politics of Norland was something all mages had to learn, so Richard had gained a preliminary understanding of the world. He knew at least that his position of being a personal apprentice to Sharon was something countless prominent figures in the Sacred Alliance could only dream of. Marquess Gaton himself didn't have the power and status for this, so he must have paid a greater price than others to get a hold of this opportunity. There were no boundaries when exploring the world of magic.

Richard quietly stopped the magic projection— using magic crystals also required money— and placed the badge in an eye-grabbing spot. All the items in his financial balance were already engraved into his memory, even more firmly than if he were to use a memory spell. With that, he jumped straight back into learning

more about the world of magic.

Two months passed in the blink of an eye. Every day, Richard immersed himself in the world of magic and numbers, and was practically unaware of the passing of time. Now, he had an excellent understanding of two innate abilities: Wisdom and Truth. The digitised world wasn't bizarre and uninteresting anymore, becoming an irreplaceable benefit that outweighed everything else.

For example, Richard was able to intuitively understand others' strengths as long as they were within his perception range. Take the other two of Sharon's students still in the Deepblue, for instance. Minnie and Randolph were level 5 and level 6 mages respectively, both only at the age of fourteen. Minnie had 70 points of mana, while Randolph had an astonishing 110. Just the amount of mana he possessed made him no different from a level 7 mage, putting him far ahead of others of the same rank. Both could cast more spells than their peers, which was the most direct discrepancy in terms of ability. Moreover, they had to have something special in their bloodlines if they were Sharon's direct disciples. A strong bloodline was always the crucial tie-breaker in many high-level battles between professionals.

It was just... A fire burnt before his eyes every morning, and a silhouette of his mother would appear amongst the flames. His bed was occasionally tainted with blood from his mouth as he clenched his teeth in his dreams.

# Book 1, Chapter 15 - Rune Armour

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Richard had discovered in his studies that he was outstanding with math, runes, and body movement control. He could understand complex formulae easily, and the more he learned the more mysterious he felt the world of magic was. It made him feel even more ignorant than he'd felt before. The boy was extremely focused, and could deal with solitude well. Right now, there was nothing in his life but magic.

Winter arrived in a flash, but Richard wasn't even aware of the first flakes of snow. The Deepblue remained as warm as spring, and with so many months of his life spent here he was already accustomed to the warm magic lights in his surroundings.

A meteor flashed past the sky tonight, unbelievably close to the earth as it sped across the snow-filled sky to land on the highest platform of the Deepblue. 23 mages were already present there, waiting in anticipation of someone's arrival despite the cold and the snow. Three of them were even grand mages.

The meteor split open, revealing Sharon's petite figure within. Two female mages immediately went forward and draped her in towels, while four others laid out a red carpet before her feet, continuously unrolling the carpet as she walked. More mages rolled up the carpet behind her, ensuring that her feet never once touched the ground since she landed.

The three grand mages walked beside her, hurrying reports about the events in the Deepblue during her absence. Sharon remained nonchalant about it all, until she brightened with the third mage's report about classes and talents. "You're saying little Richard has talent in setting up spell formations?"

Facing Sharon's gaze, the grand mage whose beard was almost completely white quivered in place, beads of cold sweat forming around his body. The gaze of a legendary being was like a snake

staring at a frog. The sheer difference in spiritual force would put great pressure on the lesser mage, making them feel like they were facing a dragon.

The man would never have thought that Sharon was interested in such a small matter. Fortunately he'd prepared the report well, immediately handing over two small magic formations Richard had sketched. Sharon's interest was piqued the moment she saw the sketches, and she slowed to a stop as she perused them in detail.

Cold sweat continued to pour out of the old man's body. These two sketches seemed extremely normal to him, just the most basic of spell formations. There were in the standard format, and there was nothing innovative about it. The runes at the front were extremely simple, and the logic was clear and limited. Still, there was no need for innovation here. It was a standard formation Richard had learnt in his classes, and the only reason the grand mage even reported it was because Sharon was interested in the boy. She'd remained close to the examination room for the entire gamut of tests they'd run on him.

This was several hours in a primary plane! Time was precious to a legendary mage, so the man had figured that Sharon was greatly interested in Richard. He'd thus kept an eye on the boy, and reported his improvements since it would be an important milestone. The grand mage was just trying to gain her favour. After all, Sharon's Delight was an important field in every month's paycheck.

This was indeed some small improvement on Richard's part. The sketches had no mistakes, but that wasn't really a big deal. Anyone with proper training would be able to avoid all mistakes in such a basic spell formation. The only thing worth commending was that this had been done first try, but which grand mage wasn't a genius? The old man wouldn't bat an eyelid at such a drawing. Of course, the formation was almost identical to the textbook version,

and the errors so tiny it was somewhat surprising, but rune drawing wasn't alchemy; there wasn't as strict a margin of error. Once one crossed the threshold, any more perfection was useless. If a millimetre of tolerance was allowed, what was the point of being accurate to ten micrometres?

If Richard could innovate on these basic spell formations, the grand mage would've looked at him differently. However, someone under level 10 wouldn't have the ability to create a spell formation of their own.

Despite all these thoughts of his, Sharon had been looking at the sketches for so long. Even if he was an idiot he'd realise things weren't as simple as they seemed. Still, he just couldn't discover what was special about them.

"Really, wonderful!" Sharon cried in joy, bringing her hands out to pat the grand mage. She was minute compared to his mighty figure, so he had to bow his waist to allow her to reach his shoulder.

Thud! However, the grand mage felt like he'd been hit with a dragon's claw when that snow-white hand touched him. He couldn't muster up any resistance to the force, falling straight to the ground.

"Oh!" Sharon exclaimed as she waved her hand, forming a water shield to stop the grand mage from falling and lifting him up, "I was a little too excited, and did not control my strength."

"It wasn't heavy, it wasn't heavy! It was great!" The old grand mage smiled like a fresh flower that had just bloomed.

Sharon waved the two sketches in her hand and said excitedly, "I never thought that you'd be able to discern the anomaly in these two sketches! You seemed to have gotten smarter since I last saw you! What have you been eating recently?"

"It was all due to your teachings." The grand mage smiled

humbly, as if he was rejecting the credit given, as if he knew about why the two sketches were special. He wasn't a simple man by any means, after all he was in his current position today, but his heart was racing right now. Sharon's unbridled laughter meant his income this month would be an amazing figure!

Sharon seemed like a little girl, impatient and eager to share her joy. She showed the sketches off to the grand mages, saying, "Look! The sketches are almost identical to the textbook!" Only after her stress on the word identical did the three grand mages look on the sketches once more, a look of revelation flashing in their eyes.

"The difference between these drawings and the standard is just a tenth of a millimetre, and even that is pretty much constant. This precision and accuracy... Only someone above level 10 who's practised rigorously can have such precision. Richard did it at level 1!" Sharon continued.

One of the grand mages said in realisation, "This is a rare talent! He has outstanding spiritual force..."

"He has excellent stats all round, with no shortcomings," another added.

The third handed the sketches back to Sharon, inhaling a deep breath before he spoke in a tone of disbelief, "We have a runemaster in the making?!"

"Indeed!" Sharon grinned widely.

Rune knights were an ultimate display of power amongst the humans. Originally archers, defenders, frontliners, or even mages, they all had the ability to bear runes on their bodies. A mid-tier rune would raise the might of a melee fighter by thirty percent, putting a level 13 or 14 rune knight on par with a level 17!

Power levels were a pyramid in the world. The higher one went in level, the fewer there were with such might. There were few

level 18s in the world, and they were all experts that many factions wanted to rope in. None of them would join an army to become cannon fodder. On the other hand, rune knights weren't inferior to these saint classes but were far more numerous. There were enough of them to turn the tides on a battlefield.

Ever since rune knights had been introduced to warfare, all generals shared a maxim— Only rune knights can resist rune knights. The ones who made this miracle possible were runemasters.

Still, despite there being far, far more level 13 or 14 warriors than saint classes, the Sacred Alliance only had roughly a thousand rune knights. Even at the peak the empire had no more than three thousand.

This was all due to a bottleneck of runemasters.

Rune knights were strategic forces, and legendary mages were strategic deterrents. Much the same way, a runemaster was a strategic advantage. However, becoming a runemaster was difficult, requiring great talents in magic, control, and the ability to create with patience. Rune knights were limited in the number of runes they could bear, so runemasters needed to shrink large spell formations down to the size of a palm before inscribing them on their bodies. A powerful runemaster's drawings were often so small the regular eye couldn't even see it. The powerful inscriptions often took months to complete.

Even as one of the three human empires the Sacred Alliance possessed no more than a dozen odd runemasters, even when beginners were included. Nobles vied for the services of each, as even novice runemasters could add a small troop of rune knights to a family in a decade. This was an irresistible attraction, one that put runemasters not much lower than legendary mages in status.

These two sketches had revealed the most important attribute of a runemaster, precision. Sharon seemed happier the more she

looked at them, her smile growing wider as a peal of laughter travelled across the earth and the skies.

‘This woman...’ The three grand mages perhaps thought of criticising her, but they still continued to smile with her on the surface. Their smiles were extremely affable, as if this runemaster in the making, Richard, was their own child.

“I really can’t stop smiling!” Sharon sighed, before resuming her laughter.

Sharon had no desires for a secular army, and rune knights were of no attraction to her. However, having been with her for a long time, they knew the true reason for her happiness.

It was simply because she finally got to teach a runemaster! It meant she could now stomp the other runemasters of the world beneath her feet! While Sharon had many talented mages as her students, there was never a runemaster amongst their ranks till now. She’d offended a runemaster once, and now he’d become a national treasure of the Sacred Tree Empire as a great runemaster, so even as a legendary mage she couldn’t touch him. Her long grudge would now be fulfilled.

However, nobody knew how the target of her delight, Richard, would be treated. Her desires were extremely wanton, but nobody wanted to point it out because they’d lose Sharon’s Delight.

It was not easy for the legendary mage to stop her laughter, but she eventually turned solemn. “Give Richard full support from today, and groom him into a runemaster. I want this to be kept secret as well, nobody but you should know,” she said strictly.

The grand mages and the others present all criticised her in their minds. Sharon’s laughter had travelled through several towers earlier, and not long after this she would not be able to suppress her smugness and announce it to the entire world. But for now, they all agreed to her on the surface and put on a solemn expression.



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It was close to the month's end today, and Richard returned to his region in the evening. The girl was already waiting silently by his door, and handed over the bill to him as usual. And he didn't ask for her name. As usual.

Richard activated his badge in the forge, reading the contents of the bill. Just as he'd expected, his expenses had only increased as he continued practising broader and broader fields of magic. His expenses had already outstripped his stipend, which meant his savings from the first month were no more. He either had to slow down cultivation, or find ways to earn more money. However, he had no idea of how to earn a single cent outside that stipend. A level 1 mage was already an official mage in the outside world, but in the Deepblue those at level 3 and below were only considered apprentices.

Just as Richard was vexing his frustration, he noticed that another field was filled in his income.

Sharon's Delight — 500,000 gold coins.

The delight of a legendary mage was indeed of value! Richard's mind completely turned blank, emptied of all thoughts.

# Book 1, Chapter 16 - Art

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Life in the Deepblue was nerve-wracking, but also systematic. Time continued to pass without Richard noticing it, the boy remaining unchanged. However, he continued to receive more and more unexpected income as the months went by, most of it under Sharon's Delight. Richard didn't understand why he was getting it, but he could practically feel the weight of all that gold at the end of every month. Even a grand mage would go bankrupt if they spent like that.

Though Sharon seemed to be appreciating him every month, Richard only managed to break even. His spending had only gone up to unimaginable heights, almost growing to be endless. This was partially due to the change in his timetable as of late, where formerly infrequent lessons had been extended in his schedule. Unlike philosophy, politics, or alchemy, sometimes he was the only one in these classes, definitely not a good sign.

A professor commanded a certain amount of remuneration for every class they held, and this fee was normally split across all the students attending the lesson. If one were the only student in a class, they would have to bear the full cost of that class, which was an ever-growing expense.

Richard noticed the attention he'd been getting ever since the first time he'd been given money under Sharon's Delight. There were often people pointing fingers and whispering about him as they passed by. His perception wasn't strong enough to know just what they were talking about, but the newfound attention made him feel increasingly uncomfortable.

Sharon couldn't keep the secret in for more than a week. She spilled the beans to her inner circle, and they in turn spread it out through theirs. The legendary mage's newest disciple was a runemaster in the making!

It took only two months for the entirety of the Deepblue to learn of the situation. Sharon's predictions always held true despite the future being ever-changing, and she'd predicted the birth of a new runemaster. People still doubted it, but they were smart enough to not say anything. Only the stupid were honest about such things, and other people would long since have eliminated those idiots for some of Sharon's Delight.

By this point, there was only one person who didn't know about the future runemaster, and that was clearly Richard himself. Of course he wasn't clueless to the changes—the increase of lessons related to spell formations like math, geometry, practical art, and art appreciation—and there was also the fact that he was the only student now in some classes that had started off with others beside him as well. However, the only thing that worried him was the ever-increasing lesson costs, and not what the actual reason for the changes was.

Richard's timetable had been changed again as of late. He'd experienced an exponential increase in drawing lessons, the foundational subject being sketching. This was a new domain for him, but still every piece of work he handed in only netted a dumbfounded lesson from the level 15 artist-mage that was teaching him. The robotic precision of the sketches surprised the once-renowned artist: Where was the charm?

Sketching was art, not just a simple recreation of reality. Was it still art if there was basically no difference from the actual object? It frustrated the man to see Richard's works, and they were like giant stones that smashed against his chest to crush his original beliefs and understanding of art itself. How could he possibly be so precise?

And yet he couldn't reprimand Richard even once. Although the sketches didn't fit with his conventional thinking, was not any extreme—in this case, the precision—an art unto itself? As a mage himself, the man knew well—even if Richard didn't have a flair

for the arts, this unerring accuracy made him an unrivalled talent as a mage; especially as a runemaster.

There was no need for him to make any unnecessary comments despite his passion, because he too could not overlook Sharon's Delight. Coin was a foundational requirement for art as well. And if he ruined a future runemaster just because of his personal taste for the arts, what awaited him may instead be Sharon's Rage. The mysophobe shuddered at the thought; he'd rather just be killed by the dwarves.

Richard had less time to stress over his bills now. He had homework to complete in the evening— an average of a drawing, two to five magic formation breakdowns and a mountain's worth of planar geometry every night. And yet, even ignoring the difficulty of the homework, the stationery too was a considerable expense. First, he needed a large number of magic papers to write on: constellation papers, moonscar papers, abyssal nightmare paper, and the like. He also needed all sorts of inks from regular dark ink to Lorskar Hell Ink. The one thing everything had in common was how expensive it all was, and the longer the name the more pricey it generally was.

And because planar geometry involved 3D compositions, he had to use a magical projector to finish his assignments. Richard had already lost count of the number of magic crystals that had used up; it was a common thing now for fully loaded boxes to be emptied by the time he was done.

Richard didn't know what he would've done without the continued joy of the legendary mage. His best case right now was maintaining a balance, and even then his time wasn't managed well. He still had meditation and magic practice outside of the lessons, and the time given to them had been compressed to an absolute minimum. His growth would be affected if he cut down any further. Richard only paced himself to the average student instead of people like Minnie, but even then he had to rely on the

500 coin mana potions every day to maintain a basic rate of progress. That was another 15,000 coins down the drain.

The only thing he could do anymore was cut down on his sleep, but he was a growing boy. He was being provided with curated meals, the flesh and blood of various rare mythical beasts, and the blood essence that they condensed in his body only increased his growth when he was asleep. Thankfully there were tons of meditation techniques in the Deepblue that could be used in sleep, and although they had limited effects they were better than nothing.

And thus Richard's biggest problem right now: He had too many things to do, and too little time to do it. He faced the mathematical problem of how to allocate time and resources to maximise the effects of every part of his school life, and the complexity of this problem only increased as time went by. Richard ended up spending four days sorting this all out, categorising it and specifying some essentials. This only spoke to the boy's intellect—he'd taken those few days to compute the best way to distribute resources and time, finally solving the question that had been hounding him. The four days were well spent, his gift of Precision told him that the new plan saved far more than the four days he'd lost in coming up with it.

At this point Richard realised he was living like a homunculus, but that didn't bother him. His world was already a digital one, so it didn't matter if he grew more robotic. And that was how he welcomed his first spring in the Deepblue, as a perfect robot with a jam-packed schedule.

On the morning of his eleventh birthday, Richard stood before his mirror to stare at his reflection; what looked back at him was a young man.

Kids from the mountains were normally a little larger than normal. With all the special meals he'd been eating lately, Richard was already half a head taller than others his age. He looked 13 or

14 years old, his childlike features fading into maturity. His eyes had already grown so deep that people could mistake him for an adult. Perhaps it was because of the many misfortunes he'd experienced, or maybe it was because of his Archeron bloodline.

He also already had defined muscles along his jaw, crescent eyes, thick luscious brows, and a straight tall nose. These were features of superior royal elves. Richard was never one who cared about looks, but all those art lessons made him aware of his good looks.

Oops, Precision corrected him, rare looks.

So what? Little Richard didn't care all that much. The six intensive months in the Deepblue had deeply influenced his mindset: beautiful things only served as accessories, decorations. Just like how accomplished men took beautiful women as trophies. Of course, he'd learnt by now that pretty men were even rarer than trophy wives.

Nonetheless, Richard had turned 11 years old now. Children from the mountains matured quickly, and 12-year-olds having families were not unheard of. Elena had summed up his year for every birthday so far, telling him what to take away from the year. But now?

The only thing Richard saw on his eleventh birthday was a reflection in a mirror. The only thing on his mind? The raging flames from his memories...

# Book 1, Chapter 17 - Duel

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Another thing Richard had achieved in all this time was more improvements to the fireball spell— he'd shortened the incantation time by half a second. This was the first step towards instant casts, and also the most important. The process greatly enriched his understanding of the principles of magic, especially because he wasn't using the same method for a standard quick cast of a spell. If he could continue enhancing the spell to its limits, he would one day be able to instacast great fireballs, a mark of a powerful mage.

Richard continued to look in the mirror. Those with elven blood flowing in their veins naturally took care of their own appearances, but today he was prepared for something specific. He'd ordered a pure white bouquet, and was going to scatter the petals from the Deepblue's outer terrace. It was said that Deepblue's summit was near the trade wind region, so in theory the neverending air currents would spread these fresh flowers out hundreds of kilometres if he threw it from up high and had good luck. He wished his mother would be able to see them from the heavens.

Richard walked out of his residence as usual, this time with that bouquet in hand. He headed for a teleportation point that would take him to the top of the Deepblue, an expensive but convenient means of transport that could send a little over ten people to a specific floor.

When he got closer to the spell formation, Richard found quite a few familiar faces waiting around it; they were people he used to have lessons with. There were other people he'd never seen before, though, seemingly waiting for something else.

These people seemed to change their minds the moment Richard walked in, pushing their way into the crowd. The formation wasn't large and there were already some people within, so it grew

crowded immediately. Still, the shaking of the formation only lasted a few seconds before the restrictive feeling disappeared. The teleportation had ended, and Richard had reached the twentieth floor of the Deepblue.

He needed to take another teleportation point here, going up to the fortieth floor. This would continue a few times, until he finally got to the eightieth floor of the tower where the terrace was located.

The moment he stepped out of the light, Richard felt a sudden, stinging pain at his buttocks. Someone had mercilessly made a move on him! Not expecting it at all, he only let out a cry of surprise and charged out immediately.

However, something tripped him as he tried to make his way out, causing him to fall. He slid across the glazed blackstone floor for a few metres before stopping, the pain from the fall so intense he couldn't get up for a moment. The sudden impact had left him slightly dizzy, but the laughter and teasing that sounded out suddenly from behind him told him he had been made fun of.

Richard didn't care all that much about that low blow, but the flowers he'd planned on spreading for his mother had fallen down and been strewn everywhere. Petals were everywhere, and the stems of the flowers seemed to be broken.

He darted over in a hurry, intending to pick the bouquet up. These were the flowers his mother had liked the most, and although they weren't rare in the village they were hard to get this far up north. He'd had to order them from a flower shop a month ago to be able to get them today.

However, another hand reached forth the moment he was about to make contact with the bouquet, grabbing the flowers first. Richard stiffened as he stood up slowly, glancing ahead of him.

A young mage, about fourteen or fifteen years of age, stood smirking in front of him with arrogance. Half a head taller than



Richard, the boy dressed in acolyte robes twisted his head to study the bouquet in his hands. He was one of the acolytes who'd been waiting in front of the teleportation point before, and by the looks of it the leader of the gang. The others advanced towards him one by one, subtly encircling Richard.

No matter how slow Richard was he'd finally understood that these people had come here especially for him. What he didn't understand was why him? Immersed as he was in the world of magic, he hadn't even interacted much with anyone other than the professors, and he'd never talked to this group before. How had he offended them? The exceptional memory granted from his blessings allowed Richard to vaguely remember that this youth in front of him was called Papin, someone from an average noble family of the Sacred Alliance. He had some amount of magic talent, but in the Deepblue he wasn't really exceptional enough to have Richard hear about him. As for his magic... The numbers in Richard's vision jumped around for a bit as Richard calculated Papin's mana reserves through his aura. The value ended up at fifteen points, equivalent to a level 2 mage.

Papin took a closer look at the disheveled flowers, even shaking the bouquet hard. It only caused more petals and leaves to fall. He then glanced at Richard from the corner of his eyes, arrogance lining his words as he asked, "Are you that Richard? I really can't tell what's so great about you that Sharon herself took you in as a disciple. Honestly though, you have a pretty good butt!"

The young acolytes all began to roar with laughter, evidently having experience and understanding in what this meant. Even without having had experiences like this before, Richard could understand the malice in their eyes. His face immediately turned red, but his persistence allowed him to hold the fury at bay as he spelt out slowly, "Return, the, flowers!"

"Ah, the flowers! I almost forgot!" Papin exclaimed in an exaggerated manner, and then put on an act as he gazed at the

bouquet in his hands. He actually licked the flowers before speaking, “Is this important to you? Let me guess... Is this for a woman? Little Richard, I really wonder if you’ve even started growing hair down there. You’re already learning from other men and giving women flowers? This isn’t good. Who are you giving it to? Let me help you! Look, I’m such a great person. I love helping people! Then again, these flowers do look rather terrible. They’re already in this state.” He then swung the flowers hard, causing more petals and leaves to fall, “It’s like something you’d give to a prostitute...”

“Return it to me!” Richard’s voice was very low, sounding like the roar of a young lion.

“Oh! So you really like this thing...” Papin bowed slightly and leant closer to little Richard. However, he released his hold and allowed the flowers to fall. Before Richard could even react, one of the acolytes nearby stomped down, and then crushed them. The pure white flower petals fell everywhere, and the bouquet could no longer be restored. Even more petals were crushed under the young acolyte’s shoe.

Richard’s response exceeded all expectations. He did not charge forward to protect the flowers, nor did he stop the acolyte. Instead, his body moved backwards, and then like a rebound from a stiff bow that had been pulled back, his hard forehead mercilessly smashed onto the smile on Papin’s face!

The teleportation formation lay in front of a large path, so there were a fair number of people gathered here. A sound of crushed berries rang out as bones snapped to the force of the blow. The attack even caused some people to twitch their noses in fear.

Things turned black in Papin’s eyes, and then red, yellow, and all other colours. The world began to spin as he lost all hold of his location. Even then Richard took advantage of everyone being in a daze. He pounced onto the youth, putting all his body weight into his hands as he pulled the older boy into the air. His hands firmly

on Papin's head, he planted that bloodied face firmly into the ground. As long as this smashed down firmly, Papin's skull would break!

However, such a terrible thing could not be allowed to happen amidst the swarm of mages in the Deepblue. A grade 6 physical shield was cast on both boys, and the repulsive force between the spells caused the two to bounce off each other like balls.

Only great mages, at least at level 14, could instantly cast grade 6 spells. Two middle-aged mages walked out as expected, stern looks on their faces. "What's going on?"

Physical shields were very effective, only disappearing to a dispel or if they took enough damage. A bloodshot Richard ignored the words of the mages, doing all he could to attack the shield and get out.

On the other hand, Papin finally recovered from his dizzy spell. He grew both afraid and furious at what had just happened, still feeling the unbearable pain from his nose. He touched the place with trembling fingers, realising everything was a mess.

The discovery almost caused the youth to faint; the face he'd always been proud of had been destroyed! The discovery almost caused Papin to lose his mind, to the point that he managed to suppress the pain for an instant. He pointed at Richard, beginning to yell in a crazed manner, "Bastard! Do you have the guts to enter a magic duel with me? The one who loses has to kiss the winner's ass!"

Richard calmed down at Papin's shouting, stopping his attacks on the shield. He tidied up the sleeves he'd bunched up his arm, speaking calmly with an expression not befitting of his age, "I accept."

"No!" The middle-aged mage who had separated the two frowned as he tried to stop them, but the other one just pulled at his robes. "Let them do as they wish!"

The middle-aged mage froze, whispering, “But Richard is a student of Her Excellency...”

The other man chuckled, and then answered in a low voice, “The one challenging him is called Papin, a follower of Randolph who’s also a student of Her Excellency. The duel was probably Randolph’s idea, but this idiot almost messed it up.”

The middle-aged mage came to a realisation, “We have no need to involve ourselves in matters between Her Excellency’s students. Fine, let’s go by the book!”

Traditionally, unresolved disputes in the Deepblue were ended with money and magic. If one proposed a magic duel and the other party agreed, if there was no obvious disparity between the strengths of the two parties a duel would be held under the supervision of the supervisors of the Deepblue. A specific arena had been set apart for this very purpose, and some mages were appointed to protect the place.

A large amount of money needed to be offered if two parties wished to use the duelling arena, to make up for possible losses from damage. The mages stationed there would then act as overseers, protecting both parties. After all, in principle a duel shouldn’t endanger any lives. Of course, there was no such thing as absolute fairness. For instance, Papin was still registered as a level 1 mage, but he already had the mana reserves of a level 2.

Richard and Papin were inside the arena half an hour later, twenty metres apart and facing each other. Papin’s injuries had been crudely taken care of by then, and beside the slightly pale face he didn’t look as pathetic as he used to. His blood-stained robes had also been changed, though the sunken bridge of his nose still looked unusual.

A fair number of people were here to watch the duel despite the fact that it was between two level 1s. News of the conflict had spread quickly, and Richard’s special identity ensured that the

viewing platform that could support two hundred people was rather full.

The audience seemed relaxed, acquaintances greeting each other without much thought to the upcoming duel. As high-profile as it was, this was still a battle between acolytes. Grade 1 spells wouldn't kill anyone, and with their mana reserves these acolytes would only be able to cast three of them at most.

Most people were only here out of curiosity. They wanted to know what was so special in Richard that Sharon herself would take him in as an apprentice, and it would be great if the boy was humiliated here. Watching a lucky person fall to the depths was something most people took guilty pleasure in.

Two of Sharon's apprentices stood behind a one-way window within a box up on a high platform, Minnie and Randolph.

Minnie was a tall and slender girl who looked cold and arrogant, possessing an imposing aura despite her youth that threw off anyone soliciting attention. Randolph was a large, tall young man; possessing an appearance, background, aura, and power well beyond his peers. Only a genius among geniuses could become apprenticed to the legendary mage herself.

Minnie looked down at the two in the arena as the countdown began, saying coldly, "A pretty good idea, Randolph. If Richard loses this duel with those conditions, Master definitely won't want him anymore. However... Why do you need to use such methods to take care of a mere level 1 mage?"

Randolph shrugged it off with an elegant smile, "I just want to see what's so special about this future runemaster. The famed runemaster, His Excellency, Saint Klaus, determined that I'm talented in the field long ago, but Master didn't let me train in the field... Besides, would it make sense for an apprentice of Master to lose to trash like that? It's just a difference of one level."

Minnie mocked Richard, "Indeed, just one level— level 1 and

level 2, that is. Are you insulting my intelligence, Randolph, or your own? Besides, aren't you afraid Master will be furious once she's back?"

Randolph chuckled arrogantly, "Master wouldn't give up on a genius like me for a loser. I get over 100,000 coins every month from her! On top of that, Father... Nevermind, the duel's about to begin. Let's watch!"

Minnie gazed towards the arena as well, but she muttered to herself, "But why is it that I hear Richard gets 500,000?"

Randolph did not speak, as if he had not heard Minnie, but his expression darkened.

# Book 1, Chapter 18 - Abandoned Child

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Richard and Papin began chanting their spells at the same time, accompanied by the corresponding gestures for their incantations. Papin's first gesture was precise and distinct, and one could tell at a glance that he was using the most practical and powerful of the grade 1 spells— a magic missile. The spell had been cast solidly, and even the fussiest of teachers wouldn't be able to find an issue with his foundation in magic.

A level 1 mage should rightfully only be able to cast two magic missiles at the same time, but 3 glows lit up between Papin's hands. The crowd grew a little restless at the boy's unexpected talent. Being the fastest spell to cast, the magic missiles had already been shot out before Richard could complete his spell.

Papin only had the ability to control one of the three missiles. He had that lock onto his target, while he sent the other two to Richard's left and right. With this tactic Richard would be hit by two of them no matter where he tried to dodge. The only exception would be not dodging, but even then he would have to face one.

Papin knew that a single missile definitely wouldn't be enough to defeat Richard; he'd personally 'experienced' the boy's physique in their scuffle. However, he was a level 2 mage himself; he could launch two more salvos of magic missiles. Three rounds of explosions would be enough to deal a disorienting blow.

On the other hand, Richard was only a level 1 mage; he would be able to launch two salvos total at best. Papin reckoned he'd be able to hold out for that extra round; even if it was quite unbearable, such was the nature of a magic duel. Had he been a level 3 mage his win would be guaranteed, and the duel wouldn't have been approved in the first place. All was fair in the Deepblue; one would require a tremendously strong backing and a large sum of material investment if they wanted everyone in the Deepblue to momentarily close an eye towards injustice, and Papin's family was

far from having such a high status.

Papin began chanting once more after the three missiles were launched. Richard still wasn't done with his spell, so the youth could already smell victory at hand. He couldn't help but feel an itch for whatever his backer had promised him: equipment, coin, and status.

Lost in thought, Papin didn't pronounce the incantations quite accurately. The normal second and a half of casting time was increased to two, but even so the crowd seemed to roar out like crashing waves before he could complete.

'Are they cheering? Is it because of the victory I'm about to receive?' Papin thought. Still, he had at least some knowledge of his ability. He raised his head blankly to look at what was going on.

It was then that his eyes grew wide in an instant, the spell he was about to cast forgotten in his surprise. Papin could hardly believe his own eyes! What was he seeing, was that a Fireball? How could a level 1 mage use a grade 3 spell? Weren't scrolls and other props like that banned from magic duels? Why was there a fireball here?

A genuine fireball had already been launched in Papin's direction. It wasn't controlled after the launch, but with how fast fireballs traveled and their area of effect they didn't need control anyway.

Papin was dumbstruck, only able to react after the fireball crossed the five metre mark. He cried out loudly as he tried to dodge it, but even though at that moment he ran the fastest he ever had in his life the surging waves of flame landed only three metres away. The explosion hit so hard that he was thrown out in a small arc across the sky, landing heavily a few metres away with a muted thump. He couldn't get up!

The huge racket in the arena suddenly turned into a deathly stillness. Everyone subconsciously held their breaths. There were many experienced and knowledgeable magi among the spectators



who could tell that Richard's fireball was weaker than normal, but ten points of damage was still very powerful against someone below level 3. Although Papin hadn't been charred to death, he would have to recuperate for a few weeks!

Another muted thump attracted the attention of the spectators once again. Richard had just come face to face with the magic missile that Papin launched earlier, protecting his chest with both arms to endure the blow as he prepared his second spell. It was all done without the slightest expression on his face, his gestures unbelievably precise.

At this moment, the arena was so quiet that even the sound of a feather falling to the ground would be heard clearly. Although Richard recited the magic incantations in a low voice, a few prominent magi with exceptional senses could hear it, and they were all visibly frightened! Although a substantial part of the magic incantation was modified, they could still identify it. The second spell was also a fireball!

Richard had already turned pale. His mana was being consumed so rapidly he felt his body draining of power, and he had less than four points of mana on hand. Even with the effects of a mana potion that would only be 5.

However, he was preparing an alternate version of the fireball this time. It was at an experimental stage, but it reduced the mana the spell took. He would be able to launch a smaller fireball with 8 points of damage, but even then he would need 6 points of mana. He pushed his way forth with sheer power of will, not hesitating to overdraft his mana just to finish this spell!

While the fireball may have been small, it was sufficiently lethal. It forced the overseer to flash into the centre of the arena, dispersing the incomplete spell with a wave as he stabilised Richard's mana.

“That's enough. This spell will cost him his life; that does not fall

in accordance with the rules.” The umpire turned to check on Papin’s condition, then declared, “The winner of this duel is Richard Archeron! Now, Richard, as per your earlier agreement you can collect on the bet. You can choose for it to be completed at another location, but I personally recommend you choose a... erm... similar but more flexible method. That is within the scope of the rules.”

Having heard the overseer’s piece, Richard walked over to the prone Papin, boorishly lifting the boy up to scan the charred and swollen face. Without a single strand of emotion in his voice, he said, “Someone once told me to return a blow to the buttocks with twice the impact.”

With that, Richard stood up and used every single ounce of energy in him to ruthlessly kick Papin’s bottom right square in the middle! The youth squealed like a pig in a slaughterhouse, his voice turning hoarse as he took short breaths between his shouts. Nobody could even tell whether the fellow was laughing or crying!

Richard walked two steps away, then suddenly turned around and delivered another kick! This one immediately raised the youth’s voice an octave, and caused the overseer to raise his brows. It seemed rather inappropriate to attack the centre of Papin’s behind, but he did agree that the kick was far more merciful than the original stakes. He expressed his approval by announcing the end of the duel, causing the spectators to disperse. Everyone was excited as they discussed Richard’s fireball. However, although nobody paid attention to Papin’s bum right now it would clearly be a hot topic for a long time.

Minnie and Randolph had never expected such an outcome. The girl suddenly sneered, “You were right, Randolph. Seems like little Richard is worth 500,000 coins indeed!” With that, she walked out of their luxury box without even bidding Randolph goodbye or consulting him.

Randolph’s face was ashen, and his eyes were practically about to

erupt in flames! His glare was fixated on Minnie's slender waist and swaying bum that seemed to have a life of its own, as he clenched his teeth tightly.

As she was about to open the door of the luxury box, Minnie suddenly turned around and said with a gentle smile, "Don't just stare at my buttocks. Instead, I think you now need to think carefully about your bum's future. Master will be back in 6 days!"

She slammed the door resolutely in Randolph's face with a thump, unregarding of etiquette or being a role model. Randolph could only snarl, smashing practically everything in the room he found. He could afford to pay for it anyway.

As for Papin, he was now an orphan abandoned by the world. Even those acolytes that used to follow him around like shadows were now nowhere to be seen anymore. Only now had they remembered how terrifying Her Excellency Sharon was. Only those who hadn't been studying long in the Deepblue would act so foppish.

# Book 1, Chapter 19 - Balance

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With her appreciating her personal space, the top third of the Deepblue belonged to Sharon and Sharon alone, closed off to everyone else... Technically that wasn't true—the security golems that were around level 15 warriors in strength would attack you as long as you weren't recognised, but if you got through them you could enter the place; and all you had to face after that was a dozen grand mages, and then Sharon herself. Then you'd be free to move in these top floors however you want. All theoretically speaking, that is.

Intermittent shrieks reverberated in Sharon's personal area, blood-curdling screams that resonated within the dark grey corridor to induce goosebumps. Those who knew what was going on would have an entirely different reaction.

Minnie appeared at the end of the corridor with quick steps. It was evident from her hurried pace, pursed lips, furrowed brows, and shivering body that she was prepared to run from this place at any time—that she wasn't exactly fond of this gloomy corridor. That was understandable—after all she was still considerably young—but the dark and damp theme of this sinister place had been decided by the mighty Sharon herself, and she could never go wrong. Nobody dared raise any opinions against the setup of these floors.

More indistinct screeches sounded from the corridor, and this time Minnie recognised the owner of the voice. She smirked and spat at the ground, reaching the end of the jail region which had a dozen cells of various sizes and functions. The region was more than a thousand square metres in area, and Randolph was tied to a rack at a cell in the centre. His limbs had been stretched out, his clothes ripped apart as a half-naked jailor brandished his 5-metre-long whip on his back mercilessly.

The dark-skinned man's tight muscles had a sheen of grease,

making him look sickening. His shorts were ripped at the sides, stained with large blotches of muddy brown— probably dried blood from people or animals.

If one neglected the brutality of the situation, they would notice the jailor's extreme skill with his instrument. The long whip howled and weaved through the air as it repeatedly struck Randolph's tender butt, leaving red hot scars in its wake. The skin wasn't being torn apart; the damage was enough to be torturous but not lasting. Standing four metres away, the jailor even distributed his attacks. Almost every part of Randolph's butt was covered, and still even where the marks crossed each other the skin remained intact. From afar it looked like an abstract, bestial art; a mishmash of colours and lines with an inexplicable beauty that was near perfection. The jailor probably counted as someone very strong.

Randolph's butt was swollen, and there was a mixture of tears mucus and saliva on his once-handsome face. As an outstanding mage coming from a family of aristocrats he had a high degree of bravery and endurance, but the punishments in this region were designed for tougher races like hellspawn, abyssal devils, lesser dragons, mix-blooded beastmen and grey dwarves. Humans, especially the ones who weren't as strong physically, were as easy to finish up with as a bowl of water. Take this jailor, for example—the simplest of whips and Randolph was already on the verge of collapse. The cell had sixteen different tools of torture, and he could use a full nine.

Randolph was cramped after the whipping, but even though he trembled he could not faint. The excruciating pain came in huge waves with no zenith or nadir, just a continual invasive pain that stabbed at his consciousness. He felt like he would die the very next moment.

The most humiliating part was the fact that all his injuries were in the area Minnie had reminded him to take care of— his

buttocks. It almost drove him insane, but thankfully for his strong will he didn't collapse until the very last minute. Still, he'd lost all strength by the end of the punishment, unable to even feel the insult anymore. The worst was already done, and all he wished for now was for this matter to stay out of the public eye, especially Sharon's. Such a thing could jeopardise his position as her apprentice.

He shivered at the thought. If he got kicked out of the Deepblue... He couldn't even bring himself to think of a life after that. Not everyone could handle being dropped to the ground from such heights, and through the course of these events Randolph had realised that it was his family background and his identity as Sharon's apprentice that was what made him special, not his talent or appearance. And in that moment, fear and regret swallowed him whole. So much so that he forgot to curse Minnie's butt.

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A dark-skinned slave was bowed down in one of Sharon's favourite lounges, a huge pot made of gold on his back with various fruits within. Some of the fruit was plump and alluring while some more was twisted and with bizarre colours, but whatever these things were the pot had everything. Many of these fruits weren't even in season, and some were produced from other planes. In a raised crystal glass at the centre were some prized fruits that were normally guarded by powerful beasts. The half ton of fruits served perfectly as Sharon's snack for the day.

The man moved forward with heavy steps, following the pebble path that lead through the forest with big trees. He passed a vast plain to come before a lake with tables and chairs set up beside it, the furniture simple and pure unlike the glamorous pot yet giving off an aura of coziness at first sight.

Sharon was lazing on a couch, sending fruits into her mouth from a similar golden pot that was almost empty beside her. The slave replaced the old pot with the new one before returning.

Although this was a lounge, it still occupied more than a thousand square metres and had its own ecology and heating systems that made it like a comfortable mountain forest.

A few grand mages were surrounding Sharon's couch, reporting about important matters. They took turns by status, most of the information being about financial affairs, Randolph, and Richard.

One of them was reporting on the winter finances of the Deepblue. Before he could finish that quick and simple report, a cherry that was supposed to be on its way to Sharon's mouth stopped itself in mid-air. Her intense gaze landed on said grand mage, a massive threat radiating from her that instantly caused everyone present to wobble a little. "What? We made a loss last season?"

The person in charge of finances was different from everyone else. He was a grey dwarf, a supposed nemesis of the human race. Few of his species had any magic talent at all, so they didn't have many grand mages. On the other hand, their meticulous nature with money made them very capable with finance.

The dwarf lowered his head and bowed immediately, avoiding eye contact with Sharon as he answered carefully, "Yes, but it was only about 60,000 coins."

But Sharon cut him off, "That's still a loss! I remember I robbed a handful of giant dragons in the middle of last year, and some of that went into managing the Deepblue. How could you still make a loss? Did you investigate?"

"I found the cause, but..." The dwarf hummed and hawed, not daring to speak up.

"Continue!" Sharon raised her voice again.

Eventually, he ground his teeth and forced the words out, "You've been in a good mood lately, master..."

The cherry continued into the abyss that was Sharon's mouth

when she heard these words. The legendary mage furrowed her pretty brows, brooding over the matter before replying, “Well, I think I’ll be in better mood in the coming days so let’s put that aside for now. Is there anything else?”

A human mage stepped forward, “We’ve already punished Randolph as per your orders, Master. How should we take things forward?”

“What do you suggest?” Sharon asked lazily as she toyed with an aquatic fruit in her hand in disinterest.

The man replied, “His aptitude isn’t too bad, and he was evaluated as outstanding in the tests. Moreover he’s the son of Duke Solam of the Sacred Tree Empire, and Master Klaus even confirmed his aptitude as a runemaster. I suggest we keep his position.”

The legendary mage scoffed, “Klaus dares to call himself a master? I hear he added ‘Saint’ before his name? Bah, since when has that piece of old garbage ever been right about people? We already have a great future runemaster in the Deepblue; discard the trash before we waste more of our resources on him. We already made enough losses last season... Here’s what, send Randolph according to our original plan.”

“But he’s still the son of Duke Solam...” The human mage reminded. Even in the Sacred Tree Empire, where powerful beings were everywhere, Duke Solam was someone with great influence. He was known as the Dragonslayer, Demonslayer, and Hellslayer, having acquired such titles despite being one step away from becoming a legendary being. He wouldn’t necessarily lose an open war with Sharon.

Sharon waved her hand dismissively and cut him off. “The boy is Solam’s son, but he’s not the only one. I’m sure the other eleven wives will help us, and I remember two of his other children were good enough not to embarrass me. Give them this slot as long as



Solam will contribute half of his original sponsorship.”

“That’s enough to stop the losses, right?” Sharon turned to the grey dwarf with great expectations.

The man made some quick calculations, but he only frowned, “It can only secure us for spring. You said your mood will only grow better.”

Sharon grew serious, searching around the pot of fruit but not finding anything for a long while. She remained conflicted for a while, eventually speaking out, “My mood... I can’t control that, what do we do now? Even the dragons are poor after I visited them last year, so I won’t be able to find anything even if I go again. And they’re even moving further and further away, becoming difficult to find...”

The dwarf suggested with wariness, “Why not... add another apprentice who pays for themselves?”

An older mage interjected before Sharon could react, “That won’t do! How noble is it to be apprenticed to Her Excellency Sharon herself? How could you just sell that spot away? One might be fine, but more? Apprentices who don’t have the ability to hold up their status will seriously damage the reputations of the Deepblue and Her Excellency!”

“Worry about the losses before you worry about reputation! Even after this every genius will fight for a spot as Her Excellency’s apprentice, regardless of whether they pay or not. Do you want the most beautiful Master to stop being delighted? She has an apprentice that will become a runemaster in the future now, everyone else pales in comparison!”

By that point the dwarf had started to shout. Sharon waved her hand to silence him, causing the two mages to wait on her words as she loitered between loss of finances and reputation. It took a while for her to make a painful decision, “Let’s add another self-paying apprentice.”

To distract herself she quickly changed the topic to Richard. “Now, let’s look at what our future saint runemaster has been up to.” The financial stress had immediately brought Richard’s prospects up to becoming a saint runemaster.

# Book 1, Chapter 20 - Accident

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Another grand mage took out two sheets of information, presenting them to Sharon. The legendary mage scanned through the papers and shot up immediately, “He made improvements to fireball? Let’s take a look... Wow, a total of seven improvements, that’s impressive. He can even cast a grade 3 fireball at level 1, even I couldn’t...”

The legendary mage suddenly cleared her throat before continuing, “I could only cast grade 4 or 5 fireballs, nothing impressive. Still, this boy’s a genius mage and a budding runemaster and he has the Archeron bloodline!”

Sharon chuckled as she flipped through the papers again and again, as if she could never have enough. Eventually, she just burst out laughing, turning to the dwarf in between her laughs, “Make some adjustments to Richard’s budget this month. Add more!”

The grey dwarf knew his master all too well. “Your Excellency, you seem to be in too much joy right now!” he reminded her before she could mention an exact amount. Sharon understood what he meant, but even if she found it funny she decided to push the change back for now.

The ‘future saint runemaster’ knew nothing about these things. Richard was standing naked in his bathroom, pouring a basin of ice-cold water over his head.

He’d long since switched off the magic heating in his residence. It was no doubt a brilliant system, able to regulate temperatures in any season, but it had a huge maintenance fee of a thousand coins every month! Besides, the freezing water was the only way to calm the boiling blood.

Richard was still puzzled about his own actions, from the fight with Papin before the duel to the actual battle in the arena. Why had he gone so far? Was it because of the boy insulting his mother?

No, it had to be more than that. Smashing the youth's head into the ground or casting the second fireball, they were both fatal strokes. The mountain kid in Richard still had a pure heart, and even though he believed Papin had to be punished he did not think the boy deserved death.

And yet, in that moment of offence, Richard could only feel the blood gushing into his head, the heat like he was placed into a furnace. Papin seemed irrevocably detestable, so much so that tearing him in half would not be enough to sate Richard's fury. So when Richard smashed his face against the ground, it was only the start of it all. On the battlefield, he would have done anything to burn Papin alive. That second fireball was meant to turn the defenseless Papin into a human torch, consigning him to a painful death.

It was taboo for mages to overdraft on their mana, and the consequences of such an act varied based on the severity. A mild exhaustion would cause a drop in mana recovery from a period varying between a month to several years. A severe overdraft would cause a direct fall in power, or even the loss of life. Still, despite those heavy consequences, Richard would have paid any price for Papin's death. But he knew, even a hundred dead Papins wouldn't calm the wrath surging within him.

The duel had left him dizzy, and he didn't even know how he got back to his residence. The only thing he vaguely felt was that there were more people around him, and they expressed more anxiousness and concern for him than before...

It took three days for Richard to wake up again. His blood was still boiling, and he felt the urge to find trouble with Papin again. It was at this point that the boy realised something wasn't quite right—he was unusually agitated and had inexplicable murderous thoughts. It was like he wasn't in control of himself, still wanting to smash something to pieces or throw something away to release the fire burning within.

Splash! Another pot of cold water poured down on his head. With the weather as it was, even if Richard's body was far sturdier than those of other youths his age he still shivered with the cold, his face paling. But just as a cold breeze swept past he felt his burning blood stirring once more, this time even resonating with the mana within his body. He clenched his teeth, using that already-rigid hand to grab the wooden barrel again. This time he shovelled some crushed ice into it, even that simple movement very strenuous with a majority of his joints stiff and his fingers numbed.

Just as Richard struggled with the wooden barrel, a sweet, crisp voice sounded behind him. "Hey! Anyone in there? It's time to eat!"

The unexpected situation blanked Richard's mind, making him feel once more like a young child being stalked by a wolf. Instinct took over as he threw the barrel aside, jumping at the source of the voice in an attempt to fight for his life. As he turned, he saw a girl standing before the door of the bathroom, peeping in. He recognised her as the girl who delivered his monthly bills, but by then he was already no longer in control of his body as he threw himself on her and pushed her to the floor.

Richard was already like a fifteen-year-old youth, his build about the same as the girl's. He crushed her below him, causing her to shriek in pain immediately.

Richard didn't know why he suddenly grew a little dizzy. Things that he could normally think clearly of now required a long time for him to understand. His body temperature had already dropped too low, but that boiling blood deep within his body grew restless, and the clothes of the girl below him were very thin—the magic robes of the Deepblue kept people warm even in winter. He could feel the girl's curves, and the burning heat of her body, all through the soft clothes.

The touch of his ice-cold skin to that burning heat caused his senses to be heightened to an unprecedented level. The girl's body

was both soft and flexible, full of youthfulness that caused Richard to feel strange. It was like something was awakening in him, his boiling blood seemingly having found a target as it rushed down below.

This journey was hardly smooth, the cold water from the bath still affecting him. It didn't make it very far before Richard tried to sober himself, questioning her in shock, "It's you? How did you get in?"

"I'm in charge of delivering your meals now. But you are always sleeping, and this is my second time coming. How would I know that you will disappear and... ugh!" The girl answered innocently. She felt light-headed from the fall just now, and her body was hurting immensely. Level 2 she may be, but mages didn't have tough physiques like fighters. They were mostly similar to humans.

It was only then that Richard realised he was still on top of the girl. He tried to get off in a hurry, but his stiff joints locked up and stopped him from doing so. He fell back quickly on the girl the moment he tried to get up, and the more he struggled the more it looked like he was trying to grind into her. After all, Richard was not a fighter, the several buckets of cold water were not for nothing.

Richard's movements caused the girl's cheeks to tint a bright red, and she attempted to push him off. But then she felt his taut muscles, and something seemed to change in her mind as she hugged him closer and reciprocated like a mischievous feline. Her eyes grew hooded as she raised her body continuously, rubbing her soft breasts against Richard's rock-hard chest. Moans escaped her in waves—a mixture of pain and indistinct breaths.

Richard was somewhat baffled by the girl's reaction. She obviously wanted to help him stand up initially, so what was she doing stopping him? Still, it caused him to feel something different sprouting within him. This was the first time in his eleven years of

life that his heart had sped up so strangely, and all of a sudden he actually thought it felt good to be laying down on her like that. He didn't want to get up anymore, not really, shifting his attention. Was the softness he felt the tender breasts of a girl? It was indeed pleasurable, if only they were bigger...

Richard wasn't overthinking, as data sprang up in his mind to support this. Precision and wisdom worked together, giving him descriptions and equations of her body's curves and structure. Richard once again understood the beauty of numbers, but a pity that it was untimely. The veil of data seemed to halve his desires.

The girl was nothing impressive when compared to the other women in his memory. Still, she wasn't too bad! Age was another variable affecting all this, and his abilities corrected his views once again.

It was then that the girl stretched out one of her legs and positioned it between Richard's thighs, continuing to move upward. She prodded her leg up as much as she could. And in that instant, the numbers in Richard's eyes flew off with no connection to each other.

# Book 1, Chapter 21 - Watering The Fruit

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Richard had no idea how he managed to stand up, but he got away from the girl and straightened his body. She had limited physical strength, and much to her surprise his body was firm and heavy. Just a few movements had left her sweating all over, limbs like jelly. Seeing Richard successfully stand up, she almost bit her lips to the point of drawing blood.

Didn't they say boys from noble families started learning the difference between the sexes at six years of age? A ten-year-old would already know everything there is, and by fifteen most young men from large noble families had already experienced over a dozen women. Why was it that Richard didn't seem to know anything? Which student of Sharon's didn't come from the noblest of families?

"That's impossible! He's her excellency's student. He must think I'm not good enough!" The young girl was so perplexed that she accidentally revealed her thoughts out loud.

"How are you not good enough?" Richard asked, at a loss. He was feeling like everything was just a dream.

The girl gritted her teeth, and then pretended to suddenly feel weak as she leaned into Richard. Seeing her look so feeble that she was about to fall on the hard, rocky ground, he had no choice but to help her. The girl used this chance to twist her flexible waist, pressing her towering portions into him.

Having tried to help, Richard couldn't help but gasp. The girl had used a hand to sneakily grab a hold of his lower body, rubbing it with force!

The feeling the girl got in her hand made it clear to her that this was a fruit about to ripen. There was still a tiny bit left, but it would take some months to a year to do it. Of course this would shorten if it was tended to, and if she forced the issue she could



push Richard over the edge herself. After all, even if he was young a fruit was a fruit.

The young girl bit at her lower lip, evidently considering something, but she ended up not going through with it. She hadn't suddenly found a conscience or anything, but forcing the boy to mature could harm him. While the chances were low, any unexpected repercussions weren't something she could take a risk on.

That's how Richard was finally allowed to put on a dark robe, sitting down on the dining table. He spaced out as he stared at the roasted meat filling the silver basin on his table. This was his lunch, and he would get the same amount food for dinner.

This was an entire two kilograms of meat before one even counted the side dishes that were substantial and the large glass of alcohol with a strange and difficult name. This was the amount he would eat in an entire day in the past, but now it had been compressed into a single meal. And he had to finish it all! One of the girl's tasks was to ensure Richard ate everything.

Even though he picked up the fork and knife, Richard found it difficult to go on. He was hungry, and that annoying feeling in his blood had disappeared after his struggle, but this much food would be very difficult for him to take. The smell of the meat was already making him nauseous, lingering at his nose and quickening the flow of his blood. He was afraid that mysterious hot blood would be stimulated again if he ate this.

The young girl saw Richard hesitating and grinned, "Eat with all your might! Her excellently has a famous saying, 'One must have a dragon's appetite to earn a dragon's strength.' That's why all the high-ranked mages in the Deepblue have large appetites."

While he was Sharon's apprentice and was filled with reverence for her, Richard was skeptical of this saying. It wasn't just the food and drink that was causing a reaction. Every smell that entered in

his nose seemed to make a vein tremble, and the girl's eyes blazed whenever they flitted past the food. She managed to remain nonchalant as she sat with her elbows on the table and her palms supporting her chin, but he could tell that there was more to this lunch than met the eye.

“What kind of meat is this?”

“The rib of the Komodo Earth Dragon,” the young girl answered instantly.

“The alcohol?”

“The warrior alcohol of elite ash dwarves from the raging flame valleys.”

“Ah, then what about these dishes?”

“Xelan, Blood Parrot, Kub Berry, and Speelan. These are the main ingredients in many strengthening potions, and have been cooked using special methods. They boost strength and vitality.” The girl seemed to know everything like the back of her hand, though this did not seem to be her main profession. Richard could tell that she was almost at level 3 already; that wasn't rare, but even in the Deepblue such talents weren't found everywhere.

Richard nodded and waved the girl over, “Come and eat a little! I can't eat so much.”

The girl cried out, and then hastily shook her head, saying, “No, no! They're all so expensive, I can't bear the cost...”

“Then take it as helping me cheat.” Richard said with a smile. Without his blood boiling he was a smart kid, and the past year of suffering had helped him mature quicker.

His words caused the girl to relax, but she shook her head once again, “No. I know you're doing this out of goodwill, but these are all special recipes meant only for men.”

She hadn't mentioned that these dishes could also help men

mature more quickly. That was information she wasn't supposed to know.

Richard took another look at the girl, and stopped hesitating as he did his best to finish all the food. He ate hard and quick, his packed schedule spurring him on even here. When he picked up the pungent alcohol and downed it all in one go, the girl's eyes flashed. It was like she was seeing an almost-ripe tree being watered.

Richard finished off all the food in ten minutes, leaving the silver plates so shiny they looked like they'd just been washed. The girl's reactions told him there would be another striking number at the end of this month's bill.

After the struggle in the bathroom, Richard's feelings for the girl had changed. He recalled the intertwining of limbs and the intentional touches as she began to pack the cutlery slowly, his gaze causing her to blush slightly. His own body started to heat up, the soft body under those robes beginning to draw him in with a mysterious force.

"I haven't gotten your name," he said suddenly.

The girl's body trembled and she looked down awkwardly, "Erin. Erin Fayla."

"Well then Erin, what can I hel... No, you've helped me with so many things, how can I repay you?" Richard picked his words with care, afraid to offend the girl or harm her pride. He'd inherited his mother's thoughtfulness, and his time spent in the Deepblue was starting to educate him on social relationships.

Erin finally looked up, showing a smiling face, "It's Deepblue tradition to provide something if you wish to earn gold. I know a lot, so if there's anything you want to learn about the Deepblue just ask me. I'll take a fee, of course, and it will be based on the rarity of the information."

Having stowed all the cutlery away, the girl suddenly drew close to Richard and planted a quick kiss on his lips. “Thank you!” she said quickly as she left. Seeing the girl’s brisk and lively footsteps, Richard suddenly found himself in a good mood...

The magic formation flickered with light as the heavy gates closed themselves slowly, isolating the area from the outer world. All noise was eliminated, and the entire residence grew tranquil. Richard regained his calm, beginning his studies for the day. The turkey-feather pen seemed extra smooth today, and the Lorskar Hell Ink that he’d just unsealed seemed extra dry. He made mistake after mistake as he drew on the abyssal nightmare paper, some so terrible that the entire formation was almost wasted. These materials cost more than 50,000 gold, and a successful inscription would give him 30,000 back. That was an amount equal to his entire stipend for the first month.

The pen didn’t seem to listen today, not stopping where he wanted as it overshot everywhere. He felt something off about him — his heart was beating fast, and he was anticipating dinner far more than normal. This magic formation wasn’t particularly difficult for him, only requiring more precision from him, but it took him much more time to finish than the most complicated formations he’d drawn before.

‘Mm, I seem to be less efficient today, but that’s not...’ Richard was deep in thought. Efficiency at 25%, Precision had answered him. It had to be said, this talent wasn’t all that charming sometimes.

Dinnertime finally arrived, and Erin was right on time. She watched silently as Richard emptied everything, planting another light kiss on Richard’s lips. This time she grabbed his hand, placing it on her chest. “You owe me one gold!” she said with a sly smile before she quickly left the residence.

The girl was in a particularly good mood. Jogging away lightheartedly, she didn’t notice the group heading over towards

the residence from the little square some distance away. Central to the group was a tall, handsome noble who looked to be about seventeen or eighteen years old. He was dressed in simple form-fitting clothing, tailored to perfection with a small dull gold emblem on the left of his chest. At the centre of that was a two-headed eagle with a large twisting snake caught between the claws. Anyone familiar with the politics of Norland would be able to recognise this symbol: it was the Hawkserpent Insignia of Duke Solam of the Sacred Tree Empire. Few within the Solam Family were allowed to even have this emblem on them.

There were about ten or so people following behind the youth. Half were warriors and the other half were mages, creating a huge disparity with the usual scene in Deepblue of mages forming groups. The teacher who had once taught Richard the history of the Deepblue was now following by the youth's side eagerly, his voice rising and falling as he explained everything in a lively manner. The only thing beside this youth's background that could cause this old mage to work so hard was the power of gold.

The youth listened absent-mindedly, focusing more on the construction of the insides of Deepblue and the crowds that came and went, his sharp gaze not letting any detail escape his notice. He would even pause on the magic lamps that provided light.

He spotted Erin's back heading into the distance, cheerful like a beautiful swallow. Deep in thought, he paused his footsteps and then took a look at the place that Erin had come from. That was a residential area, and on the long walls that extended into the distance, there was a heavy metallic gate that moved with magic. This meant that, astonishingly enough, only one person lived in this region.

"You said that this belongs to... ah, Mister Richard, right?" the youth asked the old mage.

"Yes! Richard is Her Excellency's newest student. He might be young, but he's a real genius! You can tell just from his residence.

Only two of her apprentices have such large residences. On top of that, there's another huge secret..." The old mage lowered his voice at this point, acting secretive.

"Oh, what secret?" The youth drew closer to the old mage, his interest piqued.

The old mage looked left and right, and answered so softly only the two of them could hear, "Mister Richard is a future runemaster!"

"What? Didn't you just say that he just turned eleven?!" the youth exclaimed in shock.

The old mage was so anxious that he stamped his feet, "Quiet, quiet! This is a secret! I did say that he's a future runemaster. A future one!"

The youth then understood, "That's unthinkable! Who determined that he had the talent to become a runemaster? Was it Her Excellency?"

"Who else could it be?"

The youth smiled, and then produced a small bag of gold coins and handed it to the mage, "Thank you for telling me such a huge secret."

Estimating the weight of the bag, the old mage immediately beamed. This information was secret only to the Deepblue, but he was already experienced in 'revealing' it to any new entrants for money.

The youth gave the gate in the residential area a meaningful look and then told the old mage, "It's almost time to meet Master. Let's go, it would be impolite of me to have her wait."

# Book 1, Chapter 22A - Legendary

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A rare scene was playing out in Sharon's private library. The legendary mage was sat at the table, flipping through a thick tome with hundreds of similar books floating in the air around her. Some of these books were upright, displaying text or images, waiting to be used. They flew to the legendary mage whenever she needed them, automatically flipping to the right page and adjusting angle so they could be read in the most convenient way possible. She was frowning slightly as she read through everything, altering some of the content on occasion. She was illuminated by a ray of light shooting out from a crystal arch that created a region of bright light in the semicircular room, sitting at the centre of this spotlight.

This may be called a private library, but there were seventy rows of bookshelves in front of and behind her. The shelves were all seven metres tall, filled with all sorts of magic tomes. This place didn't lose out to even the National Public Library in scale.

The partially covered door to the library was opened slightly, and a dwarven grand mage with a white beard cautiously walked in, watching as the legendary mage was hard at work. The grand mage's footsteps immediately grew lighter, and as gently as possible he called out, "Your Excellency..."

"I'm busy!" Sharon answered in annoyance, not even shooting him a glance.

The dwarven grand mage was startled, but then recalled the importance of what he was to report. After weighing his options for a while, he decided to whisper, "Your Excellency, Duke Solam's son has arrived and is awaiting an audience..."

Thud! Sharon slammed the table, causing the dwarf to swallow the rest of his words. She finally looked up, but her expression was icy as she spoke an undeniable command, "I said I'm busy. Have

him wait!”

“But...” The dwarve grand mage finally shut up, only speaking softly once he’d closed the door to the library, “Let’s have him wait, then, Let Solam’s son wait. After all he’s only been waiting three hours, even though you said it would be within two...”

The door to the library suddenly opened, and a magic book almost half as tall as the dwarf flew out to strike his back loudly. He immediately felt his innards jolt so greatly he almost fainted, and only then did the grand mage realise that Sharon truly had something important to attend to. For its sake, she wouldn’t even mind offending Duke Solam!

It took an entire hour longer for the dwarf to be summoned again. He darted to the library at breakneck speed, and a slightly fatigued Sharon tossed him a piece of paper filled with scribbles on it. She instructed him on what to do, then headed towards the meeting room.

The annoyance at the interruption remained on the mage’s beautiful little face. The grand mage maintained a respectful pose with remorse written on his face as he watched her leave, only beginning to read the contents of the paper afterwards. He was rather curious about what exactly was so important.

On this paper was a diet, consisting a total of a hundred and twenty raw ingredients and twenty-eight recipes. The precision of the portions were exact to a tenth of a gram, and the time for eating was specified to within minutes. This recipe sheet was for Richard, but this only seemed to be for one month.

Seeing this piece of paper, the dwarven mage reevaluated that future elementary runemaster into a possible saint runemaster. No ordinary runemaster qualified to have Sharon herself spend four hours of her precious time to customise a month of his diet.

A youth was waiting with his hands behind his back in a majestic meeting room, admiring the beauty of the large Floe Bay outside



the french window. Scattered sheets of ice could still be seen floating on the surface of the sea amongst the fleets of ships entering the port with their snow-white sails. There were likely large icebergs floating underneath a lot of these sheets. Although the Deepblue never froze up, the ships still had to be careful of icebergs for half the year.

One could see the Everwinter Mountains from this position, extending far off into the distance in the right. Precipitous sea cliffs and majestic mountains lined the north of the bay, while the southern geography was much smoother with dense coniferous forests. The deepwater port on the southern coast had more than half of its twelve docks filled despite it being winter, including a magic-operated open sea ship that was over thirty metres tall and a hundred long. The port was filled with people, and loading vehicles of various colours were lined up at the docks, making it less apparent that this was an off season. A busy port led to prosperity and opportunity.

There were some flags fluttering in the distance, the sheer number of masts revealing that the incoming ship was designed for the open sea. The youth's gaze was fixed on the port, the slight smile that had been on his face all this while vanishing in his contemplation. Only Minnie remained beside him in the meeting room, and she'd made herself comfortable on a sofa as she flipped through a tome.

She seemed somewhat distracted, however. A four hour wait had already exceeded her limits, but she had to endure it because of the close relations between their families. She was the only one who could accompany this youth; after all, his subordinates weren't allowed into this place.

“What splendid scenery!” the young man suddenly praised.

“Randolph said that a lot too,” Minnie answered coldly.

The young man turned back, a nice smile on his face, “My name

is not Randolph, I'm Steven. The biggest difference between us is that the only thing he knows to do is speak, while I won't comment any further."

"You sound like you're all that," Minnie languidly raised her arms and stretched out. Her pubescent body revealed itself, flirting with him inadvertently. Her eyes still didn't leave the book, but Steven's words had caught her attention. "Duke Solam's son, Steven. Although a dragon warlock like you is rare, you're not much in front of a runemaster."

There was little change to the arch of the young man's smile. "That's why I want to be taught personally by Her Excellency. Saint Klaus can still make me a runemaster, but I'll have to give up my bloodline in exchange for it. I believe Master Sharon has the ability to solve this problem."

Minnie nodded slightly. Truth be told, warlocks were rare spellcasters amongst the mages who depended on the abilities of their bloodlines to cast spells. There was a limited number of spells they could learn, but all of them far exceeded mages of the same level. Dragon warlocks were the rarest and most prestigious of all warlocks, having the potential to become grand mages in the future.

It was a difficult choice to make, to give up a dragon bloodline to become a runemaster. That he was here showed how special Steven really was; it was public knowledge that the Sacred Tree Empire had marked him as the person with the greatest potential in the next generation of the Solam Family.

"Master may or may not agree to take you in. You're too old." Minnie spoke the truth, as she usually did.

"Her Excellency will definitely take me in, I'm paying for my own studies." Steven also used the truth to elegantly shut Minnie up.

# Book 1, Chapter 22B - Legendary

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Seeing how frustrated Minnie was, Steven continued, “Once I become Her Excellency’s apprentice, there will be many things I need your help with. For instance, I know very little about the Deepblue.”

He paused for a while, before continuing, “Besides, I feel like we can better our relationship and connect to each other in a more intimate manner. Through marriage, for instance.”

Minnie trembled before looking up at Steven. She wanted to speak out, but eventually pushed down her desires. Her chest still heaved, however, and it took her a few deep breaths to calm down. She lifted her feet off the sofa and sat up, speaking in a serious voice, “This is only our first meeting. We obviously don’t know anything about each other at all, forget me liking you. Don’t you think you’re moving a bit too fast?”

Steven chuckled in answer, “My lovely Miss Minne, you should know as a direct descendant of an illustrious noble family that marriage does not require love. It’s alright as long as we don’t outright hate each other; we’re bound by family benefits and common interests.

“If you want to talk about understanding each other, I believe I understand you well enough. Randolph was successful in proposing to you, so I already gathered all the information I could. Of course, some people have sent me more information later, and I’m sure you’ve heard of me as well. There’s ample time for you to understand me better.

“Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the Niall Family and Solam Family are in an alliance that needs to be cemented through marriage. There’s no better target for that marriage in your family than you, so what is it going to be? If not me, are you going to marry one of my brothers?”

“I can choose not to marry anyone!” Minnie answered coldly.

Steven smiled calmly and continued, “That isn’t very honourable. If you do that, you will have no choice but to leave the Niall Family. Without the support of your Marquess, I don’t think you’ll be able to pay even a fifth of what I do. I hear Her Excellency hates it when people owe her money.”

Seeing Minnie sink into deep thought, he rolled his shoulders, “Look, I’m not a hateful person. As for you, Miss Minnie, it’s hard to find a better person than you as a wife. I suggest you think properly over this proposal. Then again, there’s no hurry to make a decision; the greatest merit of us mages is that we’re rational and calm.”

Sharon’s voice suddenly sounded from outside the meeting room, “Indeed, that’s a merit of mages, but warlocks aren’t mages. There’s a certain madness ingrained deep into their bones.”

Sharon floated inside, dropping herself down on the master sofa and pulling down a scarlet sash on the side. A sharp ring sounded as a side door of the meeting room opened up, and six tanned slaves entered in line. They brought a special red coffee table, an incense stove, and of course the luxurious and eye-catching golden bowl, in which the snacks of the legendary mage was stored.

Making herself comfortable, she then instructed, “Call Blackgold over.”

An acolyte immediately dashed off, and the dwarf made his way over in moments. This was Blackgold, full name Blackgold Savek Stormhammer. The Stormhammer tribe was a large tribe of the grey dwarves, so large that it had its own kingdom. Blackgold in particular was a very special one; his affinity lay not with alcohol, but with appraising ore and gemstones. He also had great talent in magic, which combined with his love for gold and unique appraisal abilities netted him a position as the treasurer of the legendary mage.

Steven chose a sofa at the side and primly sat down, looking stern and even slightly pale.

Sharon read the information she had in her hands and spoke nonchalantly, “A dragon warlock, huh. Not bad, quite rare even. What kind of dragon bloodline is it?”

“Red dragon.” Steven answered respectfully, and then turned even paler.

Sharon’s eyes flitted across a line of small text that Blackgold had underlined to mark importance. Her grim face brightened at the sight, causing her to display a rare patience as she explained, “I’ve bullied and killed many giant dragons before. Over time it’s developed into an aura that scares dragons. Since you have dragon blood in you, you definitely won’t feel comfortable at my side.”

“You are truly admirable!” Steven said. This was something that came from the bottom of his heart. This aura had to have formed from the accumulated curses of several dragons at the brink of death. The curses wouldn’t be able to inflict true harm to her, but this negative aura wasn’t going to help her in battle either. Instead, it was intended to remind the dragon to keep its guard up. All dragons within a hundred kilometres of Sharon would know of her presence. However, how many dragons had to fall for this aura to be formed on her body?

Blackgold had marked the last few paragraphs as important. He’d even written some small lines down himself, listing the items and fee Duke Solam had paid for the youth’s entrance into the Deepblue. Scanning over the last few lines, Sharon’s face brightened into a sun. She wanted to laugh, but stopped herself in front of her new pupil. It was important for her to maintain her appearance as a legendary mage.

“Then... Steven, was it? Come and take a seat here. These fruits are quite good. You can have a taste!” The mage was in such a great mood that she felt like she could share her snacks. Duke Solam was

paying the full amount, not the half that they'd agreed upon!

Steven went closer to Sharon upon hearing this, but knew well enough not to touch her snacks even if there were some things in there that he wanted to bite on impulse.

After looking through the list a few times, Sharon then handed the piece of paper back to Blackgold, albeit reluctantly. Only now did she finally look up and gaze at Steven seriously, asking him, "How's Solam doing lately? Has he been advanced to the legendary realm yet? He should've become one long ago, no?"

Steven immediately straightened up. He'd obviously been waiting for this question, "Father successfully advanced at the end of last year. He's now a shadow antimage."

Shadow antimages combined powerful physical bodies with the power of shadows, gaining great resistance to all sorts of magic. They were even immune to many low-ranked spells, and although their physical attacks weren't all that powerful the sheer speed of their attacks and movement was not second even to powerful thieves. They could use their skill to close the range in the shortest amount of time, sticking close to the opponent. This allowed them to become the bane of all spellcasters, which was what gave them the title of shadow antimages.

Even though Solam had only advanced recently, Steven believed that the advantages of his profession made him a dangerous opponent for Sharon. Before that, however, Solam had paid twice the agreed price. Great strength combined with humility, it was bound to make Sharon treat him as the most important person to nurture. However, Steven still had no idea why his father had taken the initiative to pay such a great amount when the fee had already been determined.

After hearing that Solam had become a legendary, Sharon froze as expected. She then pressed on, "He really advanced to become a shadow antimage?"

“Yes, I can confirm that.”

She remained frozen for a moment, before she burst into laughter, “He didn’t become a paladin like he was suited to! Oh, Solam, looks like that vicious beating I gave you back in the day left you with some serious trauma. Hehe, does he think becoming a shadow antimage will allow him to enact revenge? Looks like I need to teach him a more memorable lesson so he knows that even legends need to be humble in front of me! Ahaha! I can’t wait anymore!”

Legendary mages always made swift decisions. Sharon stood up even as she spoke, instructing people to prepare her luggage as she walked towards the patio of the meeting room. It looked like she didn’t plan to waste even a second, about to fly south and duke it out with Solam immediately.

Only after she stepped on the dark red floor tile on the patio did she remember something, turning towards Steven, “You’re my apprentice from now on. I’m busy right now, so I have no time to teach you anything. Come back in ten days; use that time to familiarise yourself with the Deepblue. Tell Minnie if there’s anything you need, I’m off!”

She turned into a meteor shooting into the sky, leaving a gaping Steven behind still half-sitting and half-standing like a comical statue. He’d wanted to call her back a few times, his mouth flapping open and closed, but he ended up unable to make any sounds.

He finally understood why Duke Solam was willing to pay twice the fee, and why the man had warned him to never reveal the news of him advancing.

# Book 1, Chapter 23A - A Traumatic Experience

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Steven's arrival only caused a slight splash in the Deepblue, disappearing into the surging waves. Sharon's return ten days later caused a larger stir, but even that wasn't significant. The legendary mage's entrances were always loud and grand, even if she'd only gone to the White Deer Forest a hundred kilometres away for an excursion. Nobody had a clue about the result of the battle between the two legendary beings, however; even Steven hadn't obtained any news from his family.

Things remained normal in the Deepblue, the torrent of glow pushing things along in a tense yet regulated environment. Richard realised Sharon's Delight had grown a fair bit, reaching a record 800,000 coins. But then he found he had another class to attend now too.

He'd been enrolled into Basis of Complex Magic Formations, a one-to-one lesson from a grand mage. The class naturally used up a lot of high-grade raw materials, and with the Deepblue's abnormal prices Richard's huge bonus began to melt like snow in the sun. The additional income would be voided by the time summer arrived, and he would have to start worrying about his money again.

Erin continued sending food over to him. The amount Richard had to eat only increased, and the way he had to eat it grew increasingly strange. The frequency and timing of his meals grew even stricter, to the point that it was slightly unbearable. However, Erin's company and explanations miraculously made it more stomachable.

The girl got intimate with him in different ways every time he finished a meal. Sometimes a kiss, sometimes a caress, or even a simple hug; under her lead Richard had already learnt of the



general anatomy of the female body. The blood in his veins boiled occasionally, and he would need to use something like meditation to suppress it.

However, even with how ignorant he was, Richard had gotten a feeling for what was about to happen. Although he was young and inexperienced, his instincts pushed him to explore the depths of the girl's body. The young girl didn't stay long after the meal, though, only lingering around for five minutes at most before she left. She was so accurate that it seemed to him there was an enchanted clock timing her.

One day at the end of the month, at the usual time for dessert after the meal.

Erin grabbed Richard's hand, pushing it up so he could lightly feel the front of her bosom with the large frills and pearl button. The surface seemed coarse, the patterns on it bumpy. Richard's senses had grown more keen after eating, making the fabric contrast even more with the plump satiny bundle his fingers slid into. He suddenly felt his body heat becoming increasingly apparent, and in his hurry he found he'd already opened the girl's buttons up.

There was nothing hindering him inside. The young girl's body posed a fatal attraction that caused him to use his strength to pull the last of her clothing away. It flustered the girl a little at the start, but then she held his hand and pulled him up, pressing herself into his body as she slid down with a bent head. This was a fierce watering, the moment where the fruit would finally mature!

Even as Richard anticipated the next moment, Erin suddenly jumped up and exclaimed in a hurry, "Oh my! Time's up!" She hastily pulled at her clothes, grabbed the plates, and darted away.

'Will anything happen tomorrow...' Richard wondered vacantly, his heart still pumping away near the limits of its ability. He felt slightly suffocated...

Nothing at all happened the next day. Erin seemed troubled, her expression unable to hide her gloom. When Richard asked her about it she refused to divulge more. After the meal she just grabbed his arm and pressed down on her chest lightly before running off.

There was a price to such intimacy. No matter what degree of contact there was, Erin would receive a gold coin. Richard knew the prices of the Deepblue well by this point, and that one gold coin was nothing. It may not even be enough for the girl to have a good meal, which was why he asked her so many questions and paid for the answer. However, the girl was strict here as well, only asking based on the value of the information and not a bit more.

Honestly speaking her information wasn't reliable. The priciest of the lot was that Papin and his followers had disappeared after the duel, some not returning to their families. It also said this was related to another of Sharon's students, Randolph. Still, the price of all that was 120 coins, and there was no information worth more than fifty past that. Richard knew that the entirety of her month's work wouldn't be able to support a day of training. Of course, that was based on his own standards.

Erin's attitude had changed from that day. She grew more restrained in her interactions with Richard, and no matter how intimate they got she never took things further. Even though the fruit was already matured.

Richard had sensed the change as well, but no matter how much he asked directly or with innuendo, there were no results. However, he'd find sobs instead of the bright smile he used to see when he took his focus off eating. It caused his world to turn dark, causing him to lose enthusiasm about anything.

Nothing much happened in the coming month, although someone called Steven had come over to introduce himself as another of Sharon's apprentices in a public lecture with a few hundred people around. Time passed as per usual, and summer

quietly arrived.

Erin seemed to be growing even more hurried. She was starting to keep an obvious distance from him, to the point that she stopped taking the daily fee of a coin. The food grew increasingly difficult to swallow even as the servings grew larger and larger.

Richard had grown noticeably taller and more sturdy by now, his classes including fundamental physical training as a warrior. His training in magic had quickened so greatly even he himself found it unimaginable, and most of his time was taken up by the tedious classes.

The arrival of summer brought Floe Bay's most beautiful season. The surface of the sea was as calm as silk, the glaciers a gentle blue. The air in the azure sky was clear and fresh, and the green glow of vegetation was the most dense it had been all year, looking diverse and splendid. There was an obvious increase in traffic through the Deepblue, and the number of beautiful couples sunbathing by the beach became part of a beautiful landscape. However, Richard lacked the mood to admire this; he was still worried.

One certain night, Erin left Richard's residence as per usual. An enchanted rune flickered at a corner of her clothing the moment the heavy metal gates closed, sending a notification far away. A mage dressed in dark robes fixed his sight on the girl from the distant shadows, his gaze so sharp she couldn't help but quicken her steps. Once the notification told him she'd left within the designated time, he nodded and pulled the robe over himself before disappearing into the shadows.

Erin quickly walked towards the path that led to the upper layers. While teleportation spell formations were convenient, they were expensive. Only official mages appointed by the Deepblue had the means to use them regularly, and even though the path took more time anyone with some degree of fitness could get from the bottom to the top in one go.

Erin found someone standing right in front of her as she turned a corner, their appearance so sudden she almost fell into the person's embrace. The young girl cried out, but thankfully she had the reflexes to avoid bumping into them. She apologised and tried to walk past them, but found herself being grasped firmly by a strong hand. Unable to get away from the grip, she felt like the bones in her wrist were about to break.

"You're Erin?" asked a tall young mage. He had a gentle voice, but the vice-like grip on her wrist made it obvious to the sensitive girl that this person didn't actually have a good temperament.

"I am Erin. May I know how I should address you?" Erin asked politely, not changing her expression as she attempted to retract her hand. However, her efforts were in vain.

"My name is Steven. Since you earn tips by selling information, you should know who I am." The young mage said with a smile.

That sharp, cold gaze made Erin feel like a frog being hunted by a snake. Cold sweat beaded on her body, causing her clothing to stick to her skin uncomfortably. She felt a chill inside her heart when the youth announced his name— The Deepblue belonged to Sharon, and every one of the legendary mage's apprentices made the headlines. While she could clearly sense malicious intent from Steven, his identity didn't let her fight back. She grew horrified, and a thread of despair began to rise without her bidding.

"Esteemed Mister Steven, I've always left without delay and never done anything out of line. What do you want from me?" She cried out in fear.

Steven leaned forward, pressing his face close to Erin's as his right hand caressed the girl's waist. It moved up, testing her chest. It wasn't quite supple, instead soft and springy. He then pushed the girl's chin up, bringing their faces so close together that the tips of their noses were practically touching.

"I heard that you get a gold coin from Richard every day. Now

tell me how you get those coins.” Steven’s voice lowered, sounding like the hiss of a snake. A long red snake-like tongue emerged from his mouth as he spoke, brushing the girl’s lips.

Erin felt her body go cold. Steven was giving off an aura that made her feel extreme terror, and her body was beginning to stiffen. It was like she was being struck by some weak fear skill, likely some sort of bloodline ability. It made her feel even more despair, for the talent to use a bloodline ability at such a young age was rare even in the Deepblue.

However, Steven’s words got the girl’s eyes twinkling. She had a sudden surge of strength as she pushed him away, yelling, “You’re not an enforcer mage!”

# Book 1, Chapter 23B - A Traumatic Experience

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Steven froze, and then began to laugh, “I didn’t expect you to be so smart! Indeed, I’m not an enforcer, but...”

“No buts! Don’t even think of touching me, or I scream!” The young girl’s voice grew louder. They were in a remote area, and all parts of the Deepblue were designed to minimise the leakage of sound. Her loudest screams wouldn’t make it far enough to be able to save her. However, there was magic recording equipment all over the Deepblue’s public areas. Her voice would be recorded.

The Deepblue was under the ownership of a legendary mage. If Steven tried to take her by force, Sharon would find out soon enough. With her temper, Steven’s best outcome would be being beaten up ruthlessly like Randolph had been and getting thrown out of the Deepblue. Everything here had its own value, and Erin knew hers very well. No sane person would give up their identity as an apprentice of Sharon’s just for her body.

Steven stopped as expected, not taking a step further. She didn’t dare provoke him much— this man’s aura caused her to shudder in fear— but she didn’t linger any further as she started to run off towards the teleportation point. Even if it would use up a lot of money, Erin didn’t want to remain close to him for one more moment.

“You might want to reconsider,” his voice suddenly sounded from behind her. There was something else that made her hesitate — the crisp jingle of gold coins hitting each other.

‘At least 200!’ Erin judged instinctually, slowing down to look back. Her heart rate increased, and she began to think, ‘I’m already safe anyway...’

Steven remained where he was, gazing upon her like a wolf

looking at prey. His calm smile was filled with confidence as an intricate leather pouch swayed in his right hand, continuing that oh so sweet jingle of gold. The pouch wasn't large, but it had been stretched greatly.

Erin was even more certain of her initial guess upon seeing this. There had to be at least 200 coins inside, and her abundant experiences and keen senses revealed a slight magic glow in the darkness. This leather pouch had been made with magic!

Magic leather was extremely expensive, and it was very rare to see it used in pouches. Only a core member of a noble family could afford such luxuries, increasing the amount of space within the pouch and lightening the contents within. They also caused any materials inside to last much longer as well. A pouch with even the most basic of flash spells as decoration would far exceed its capacity in cost.

Steven's grin grew more and more similar to that of a venomous snake that had trapped a frog, "I just touched you, so this is your payment. Come, take it!"

Erin felt her throat go dry, unable to say a word. She really wanted to just turn and run, but her feet began to shift in Stevenson's direction while all sorts of thoughts ran through her mind unceasingly.

'He won't force me to do anything. Besides, he's already touched me, so this sum of money is compensation for what happened, right...' While her thoughts were in a mess, she suddenly found that she had unconsciously walked over to the noble youth. He seemed to know her every thought, grabbing her hand and placing the pouch in her palm with a demonic smile, "This is yours."

"But I..." Her throat was so parched at this point that she couldn't continue. Nothing made sense to her, but she couldn't tell what exactly the issue was either.

"I know you're in dire need of money, and the Deepblue has

always been about peace and voluntary exchange. Here's a suggestion..." Steven paused, his eyes sweeping over the girl's body in such a way that she shivered. "If you maintain your current body and come to bed with me, I'll definitely give you a satisfying reward. For instance, I can pay off all your debts..."

"No, I can't..." Erin shook her head with all her strength, looking pale as she retreated step by step. However, her grasp over the pouch was strong, her joints already turning white from how much force she was using.

Steven stood with his hands behind his back, not looking like he was going to pressure her. "There's no hurry, take your time to consider it. The proposal is valid for the month."

Erin suddenly turned and darted away.

Minnie appeared behind Steven, like a spirit walking out of thin air. Her dull eyes trained themselves on the girl who was heading into the distance as she spoke coldly, "Someone like her living on the boundaries of the Deepblue could do anything for money. This is the kind of person you want? If that's the case, don't even think about touching me."

Steven suddenly chuckled, speaking in a low voice, "Our marriage has already been established. Based on the law, I can touch you however I like!"

He pulled Minnie to his side, right hand reaching into her robes as he began to fondle her forcefully. The girl turned pale from anger, but all struggles and resistance was rendered pointless. The seventeen-year-old Steven was sturdy and strong, completely suppressing a young lady like her.

"Master won't let you off!" Minnie exclaimed with all her might. She kicked and punched, trying her best to resist. She'd completely forgotten that she was a mage, not just a lady who'd recently come of age.



“Master?” Steven snickered, “Do you think you could pay the Deepblue’s fees without any financial support from my family? So much has changed in one month; if not for our help, Marquess Niall may not even be able to keep his own land. He wants to turn every gold coin into a magic arrow, so how would he have the money to support his genius daughter studying in the Deepblue? Stop being so naive. If he were that capable, why did he sell you to us?”

The girl grew one shade paler when she heard the word ‘sell.’ A trade had been conducted behind the scenes of the marriage; the hasty exchange of benefits was basically just selling her away.

“Without me, my dearest Miss Minnie, your glamorous and relaxed life as the apprentice of a legendary mage could disappear tomorrow. Have you really thought this through?” Steven’s words blew over Minnie like freezing winds in an icy hell. Her joints stiffened, and her struggles grew feeble.

His hands were just as cold as his voice as they slid down, “If you’ve thought this through, then please spread your legs.”

Minnie suddenly trembled violently, tears involuntarily falling from her closed eyes. Steven soon resumed his elegant tone with a slight smile on his face, “As for Erin, I only have one reason for being interested in her. Our little Richard obviously likes her, which is why I have to make her mine beforehand. You’ll help me with Richard, right?”

“My dearest Minnie, you’re too fixated on your magic research, and haven’t paid attention to the outside world for such a long time. I’m sure you haven’t even paid attention to the news about your own family, no? Do you know who it is that attacked Marquess Niall? I can tell you that it’s Viscount Alice Archeron, the same family as Richard Archeron. You should actually be happy; if it was Richard’s father Gaton that had attacked the marquess wouldn’t have been able to hold on until our reinforcements arrived. If that had happened, do you think you

would remain worthy of marriage into the Solam Family? You'd be no different from that girl in the border districts. Still, though, the body of a defeated marquess' daughter would be worth gold. A lot of gold, yes, but still a buyable commodity.

“Alright. This is all to say that Richard is a common enemy. That's why, dearest, you should help me.”

Steven patted Minnie's face, and then watched in satisfaction as she looked towards Richard's residence with hatred.

# Book 1, Chapter 24A - A Summer Like Winter

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Erin's sudden change covered Richard's vast summer sky with haze. Her teary face and bitter smile appeared within his mind every break he got, and he couldn't rid himself of it no matter what he did. His heart was filled up by her image, and his gifts of wisdom and truth ensured that every word, every laugh, every move of hers had been recorded in his mind without any discrepancies. This included detailed images of every part of her body, including the mysterious bit he hadn't uncovered completely yet.

The mind was always subject to changes. Just days ago every memory of Erin brought Richard warmth, joy and anticipation that had him looking forward to the next day. Now, as those memories grew day by day, those heartwarming moments became a scalding iron that branded his young heart, leaving a thin trace beside the gaping scar already present.

Richard knew that Erin had changed greatly, and also that something was bothering her, but he didn't know the exact cause. She didn't even reply whenever he asked her what it was.

It was only now that he realised he didn't have a single friend in the Deepblue beside Erin. Even as Sharon's apprentice he only saw her three times so far in the entire year he'd been studying, and outside of the grand mages who taught him now most of his time was spent with the girl.

The heartache grew even more vivid whenever he was alone, and sometimes it hurt so badly it felt like the raging flames that haunted his deepest nightmares. The only way he gained peace was by devoting himself to the vast world of magic and knowledge, putting all his focus into complex formulae, graphs, mana, and foreign creatures.

This summer, as far as Richard was concerned, was just as cold as winter. His performance was excellent in every aspect of his study, the standard of his works leaving even the experienced grand mages speechless regularly. The only thing they could do was praise the wisdom of Her Excellency, unable to comment further. His mana growth had doubled this summer, and he would likely become a level 2 mage by the end of it.

Even outside magic his performance was shocking. Philosophy, history, politics, economics, the young man was like a thirsty desert as he absorbed every single drop of knowledge sent his way.

One day, even the picky maestro who taught him art was sent into silence for a long while. Richard had turned in an image of a girl holding a huge thermos box, her back turned as she walked briskly towards a dark tunnel. That frozen silhouette completely brought across her depression, panic, and worry, the edge of the magic robe seemed to continue swinging with the wind. He wasn't sure why, but the maestro felt like the thermos box was the central theme of the art, the strokes used for it different from those used for the girl. Although the girl seemed to be alive, the box actually seemed to be in motion, a heavy rock that dragged the viewer's heart down. The colouring was simple and plain, everything drawn by a magic quill, but the numerous lines of varying depths made this piece of art breathtaking.

Even after an hour staring at it the artist found it hard to make a comment. He finally let out a sudden heave, telling the assistant by his side, "Even a depiction of reality, once it surpasses the limit, can become art. This is but a moment he caught in time, but it will be engraved in eternity!"

The assistant was left in great shock. Never had he expected that such a simple sketch would earn such great comments from the maestro, someone who was one of the few at the peak of the Sacred Alliance in terms of art. Something with such high appraisal from him would easily sell for millions in other worlds, the only

restriction to the price being that Richard was still alive and would likely continue to be for a long time. But even then, the boy would perhaps not create something like this again in a long time.

The Maestro had mixed feelings. He shook his head heavily after a long while, waving to his assistant to leave before he sat down before the easel to stare at the work. Time passed, but as dusk arrived a mass of mana lights came into being around the maestro to add another source of illumination to the dim room. The dim light made the sketch seem even more infectious, having the viewer feel like they were in that dark, cold tunnel that was vast and endless.

“How long has it been since I last saw art like this? This kid... His heart must have been twisting as he drew her...” he murmured to himself. He was once young as well, and the peak of his own artistic career came in the midst of his worst devastation. He hadn’t been able to find the same passion and impulse he’d once possessed once fame and accomplishment came his way... He seemed to see Richard himself through this piece of art, a beautiful quiet boy who hid a wild passion within him.

The maestro felt a sudden urge of panic, unable to sit still as he stood up and paced to and fro. It took him an entire hour to make what seemed like a hard decision in his heart, and he eventually turned to look at a corner of the art room.

There was a delicate machine there that stood out from the casual surroundings. It was used to activate a month’s bill, and he was supposed to find a place to put it, but as someone who was easygoing he’d just let the expensive machine lie in the corner of the art room, only fishing it out of the scrap papers whenever it was needed. The sight of it naturally brought the monthly bills to mind, and Sharon’s Delight.

The legendary mage hadn’t been delighted with him in months...

This piece of art... it was far too realistic for him to pretend it

didn't come from a place of truth. This was an exception, and one that Her Excellency had explicitly told him to report if he saw it. Even if he only thought with his feet he'd know that a failure to report would garner the legendary mage's anger. As an artist he would struggle a little to choose between his conscience and Sharon's Delight, but there was no question about the choice between his conscience and Sharon's Rage.

Full of misery, the Maestro took down the sketch, wrapped it up carefully, and left the art room in a hurry.

# Book 1, Chapter 24B - A Summer Like Winter

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An hour later, the portrait was placed in front of Blackgold.

The grey dwarf had the maestro waiting almost forty minutes before he crawled out of the heap of gemstones which occupied the entire table and jammed half the entrance, only spending a minute to listen to the man's explanation. The Deepblue was a world of magic and money, unrelated to art. Thus, even if the dwarf only came up to the maestro's chest despite having one foot atop a mountain of gold and the other held aloft by magic, he seemed to tower over the artist instead.

The dwarf didn't pay much attention to the maestro's words, skipping everything to take a look at the piece of art which was the key point. Her Excellency Sharon had stipulated such things be reported, and because of that he carefully used his rough hands with calluses as thick as beast scales to unwrap the portrait.

Silence ensued as the grand mage started at the portrait with full concentration, his lips moving fast as he mumbled unknown words to himself. The maestro was astonished by the sight; he'd never thought Blackgold would be able to appreciate the beauty of this piece of art.

The dwarf eventually heaved out a gust of turbid air, rubbing his dry eyes, "Just this?"

"Huh? Yes..." The maestro was confused.

"The piece isn't even coloured yet?"

"..." The man couldn't keep a hold on his irregular heartbeat. He took in a long breath before he answered softly, "This is a sketch."

The dwarf came to a sudden realisation, taking another look at the sketch, "Hmm... Not completely mature, and her face and figure should be average... Of course that's from a human point of view, if I judge based on Stormhammer tradition... Wait, AHA! I

see, the thermos box! That's the one specially prepared for Richard, and the details are completely accurate without a single fault... So much like Richard, did you know grand mage Loton who teaches him spell formations came back to praise him thrice this week? This year... As I recall, it's like fifty or seventy times... Whatever it is, it's a lot! That old man hasn't had this much praise to give out in the past ten years!"

The maestro couldn't describe his feelings at that point, nor could he shout at Blackgold. He tried to guide the man patiently, "Take a closer look at the precious moment caught in this piece..."

The dwarf took a second look, and then a third... Still, he felt the piece was too dull without any colour. The artist's mood was as dark as Richard's by the time he left Blackgold's office; he'd never faced such a setback that made him lose confidence in art itself before. He couldn't understand; why did this master appraiser of jewelry, magic equipment, and antiques not have any flair for art? His comments as an outsider were so destructive!

The two simple yet elegant bronze doors of Blackgold's office slowly closed behind the maestro's back. The doors were double the height of normal ones in the area, representing high office, wealth, and status. They garnered the jealousy of many for the position they represented. Of course, there was no need to explain why a dwarf only half as tall as a human would want to have his office so tall.

Blackgold sneered once the doors shut, muttering, "How could it be so simple to make boss happy?" There were a total of 67 items in his cabinet vying for Sharon's Delight, including this one.

The dwarf instantly made his way back towards the mound of gems, but then he frowned and stopped. He returned to his desk, unwrapped the portrait, and examined it for a little over ten more minutes before he stowed it away into a smaller cabinet after some hesitation. The small cabinet had the same kind of things, but there were only five items here; he put the art piece in second



place. The difference between the two cabinets was that the ones in this one would soon be handed to the legendary mage for perusal, while the others would be thrown out like trash over the next few months.

Summer passed in the blink of an eye for Richard. The next day was already the autumn festival, marking the beginning of autumn where fish could no longer be found in Floe Bay. Millions of people living nearby would hold a grand celebration on this day, expressing gratitude to the god of the sea for granting them the food to survive the long winter. The Deepblue, located right next to Floe Bay, commenced autumn with this festival.

Of course that was all meaningless to Richard. All his time was spent either completing the heaps upon heaps of assignments he had, or meditating and practicing magic to increase his mana. He wished to fill up the entirety of his time; if he didn't wild thoughts would bubble up in his mind that were hard to get rid of.

Erin reached his place on time the night before the festival. She already found it hard to carry the box with his dinner in one hand now, and one could imagine how much heavier it would grow in the future. She sat quietly by his side as he ducked between all the food, just watching him eat.

At this point the gold had stopped exchanging hands, and the two rarely spoke. Erin didn't get a single coin from Richard, while eating for the boy had grown completely miserable. No matter how she tried the young lady couldn't hide the fact that she was troubled, but she refused to tell him why no matter what. It left him with a pain he could not soothe.

Richard swallowed the last bit of dessert with great determination before he raised his head to really look at the girl for the first time that day. He wanted to thank her like he usually did, but the string of numbers that appeared on the girl's body made him freeze on the spot. The girl's figure had changed!

The minute changes were enhanced in his digital mindscape, the numbers aligning in front of him. Her breasts had grown larger, but they weren't balanced. This wasn't some natural growth, instead due to some external injury.

Her position was quite awkward as well, especially her trembling legs that caused her to shift her weight around subtly on occasion. It was like the cotton cushion of the chair was a bed of needles, poking into her down below. Her eyes were a little swollen as well, more red than normal seemingly from her crying just moments ago. Her robe was much thicker this time, wrapped tightly around her, but an accidental movement had exposed a hickey on her neck. Her heartbeat was much faster than usual, faster than his own. In fact, it was so fast that a serious event should have occurred.

Adding up all the traces and marks, an immediate answer welled up in Richard's mind, one that he refused to believe.

"You... slept with someone else?" Richard's voice was dry and husky, so much so that even he couldn't recognise it. At the age of eleven he hadn't known what nobles started to learn at the age of seven or eight, but in this past half year this girl in front of him had taken him halfway. He'd already learnt of how males and females could interact.

Erin trembled, her face turning white. Yet the truth being out somehow calmed her down, and she raised her hand to tidy up the messy hair by her cheeks, "Yes, last night."

Richard took a deep breath and closed his eyes, refusing to see the devastating numbers stacking up in his vision. "Why?" he asked, his voice growing as calm as hers. He had become ice-cold.

"I need money."

"I have a lot myself." Ever since Richard started noticing Erin change, he was like a bird breaking out of its shell. He'd started to learn of the outside world, and that he couldn't judge others by his

own standard. Take expenses for example; his monthly income would be enough for over ten people to live a good life in the Deepblue.

Still pale, Erin looked deep into Richard's eyes and shook her head with determination, "But I don't want your money."

She cleaned up the thermos box as usual. Walking towards the door, she turned and said, "Oh, I forgot to inform you. Someone else will be delivering your food from tomorrow. So, Richard... See you around."

The gates shut slowly with a loud thud, and Richard lost all his energy as he leaned back into his chair. He pulled at his hair, trying to convince himself that nothing had happened just now, but both his abilities and the traits he'd developed in his childhood told him this was cold hard fact.

What he couldn't understand was why Erin didn't want his money. The boy still didn't know that people insisted on things for unknown reasons when they were young, persisting with their emotions as they let go of whatever truly meant something to them.

# Book 1, Chapter 24C - Just Like Winter

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The winter-like summer had just passed.

Even early in autumn Floe Bay was freezing cold, no different from the harsh winter. The only way to differentiate was that the colours of the vegetation hadn't faded completely yet.

Richard was like a volcano that had been lying dormant for a long time, overflowing with great energy that had suddenly erupted out of nowhere. His craze for knowledge surprised his professors again, and they'd already been dumbstruck by his progress in summer! It was almost unbelievable that someone could do so much in such little time, but this tiny boy was living proof.

He'd already tweaked his schedule many many times, leaving himself no break to reflect. His schedule had been planned to the second, so whenever his fatigue peaked he just cleared his mind and collapsed on his bed to enter deep sleep instantly. He'd thrown out even the most basic vigilance he'd learnt by living in the mountains, the only way to sleep so soundly that three hours would be sufficient to pull him through a day of learning. That was also how his mana gain during sleep was no less than what he would get while meditating.

The reports Blackgold received were as abundant as the flakes of snow outside, causing the dwarf to rage. He spared no effort in ensuring as few made it to the legendary mage's desk as possible, just in case Her Excellency grew overly ecstatic and disrupted the already-frail balance of expenses and income in the Deepblue. However, the grey dwarf's powers failed him at times. Written records fluttered to every corner of the Deepblue like water gushing out of a geyser, and many of them flew so far that they bypassed him and delivered themselves to Sharon on their own.

The finances of the Deepblue began to shake with uncertainty

once more. Thankfully Duke Solam had made it up to them with a huge support fee out of the blue for some reason, and they'd sold another spot as a paid apprentice to the Millennial Empire which was one of the three major human empires.

Although these events covered for autumn and winter, grey dwarves didn't lack foresight. Blackgold was very good at financial speculation, and was used to worrying about the Deepblue's situation 300 years into the future. Now, it looked like they wouldn't be able to make it past spring.

The grey dwarf grew more haggard as the days went by. Some miracle had thinned his sturdy and stocky frame, making him a little bony. His coat evidently didn't fit him anymore, fluttering slightly in the wind whenever he moved his arms to cast a spell. This was just like the unstable accounts.

Blackgold had to deal with a sea of numbers every day. He had a pretty steady income, but his expenses were always hard to estimate. They tended to exceed his funds rather than fall short, which made him upset. Every piece of his profit consumed was like a piece of his flesh gouged out while he was still alive. However, the legendary mage's joy wouldn't be put aside just because of the grey dwarf's determination; at times, she would even celebrate the tiniest of Richard's achievements.

This autumn, the grey dwarf was the only person in the entire Deepblue who didn't want to see Sharon happy. At his most helpless, he'd even considered embezzling funds from Sharon's personal stores. If Her Excellency deigned to open the slightest crack in her purse, the Deepblue's finances would be solved with the snap of a finger. He had once been bewitched by this idea: who knew how many gigantic dragons' worth of wealth Her Excellency had in her exquisite little wallet? However, it was fortunate that he quickly regained his senses and realized how silly his plan was. Even the mighty dragons dared not lay their hands on Sharon's funds, what would a tiny dwarf be able to do?

However, he wasn't intimidated, instead finding his own motivation in this. If he couldn't solve the Deepblue's finances right now, what was the use of keeping him as a treasurer? Any high-level elf could take care of accounting...

Richard and Blackgold were equal in their gloom, but while the dwarf was growing haggard the boy couldn't be any more different. Stood in front of a full-length mirror on the last day of autumn, he carefully scrutinised himself.

He was growing into a model male form: broad shoulders, a muscular chest, a rapidly shrinking waistline, a tight yet powerful behind, and even a pair of elven legs that were slender yet toned. His face had changed a little as well. Perhaps it was because he hadn't smiled in ages, or perhaps because of how much time he'd spent in a thoughtful silence. The remnants of his immature gentle youth were wiped away, being replaced by sharpened and obvious edges. It was much like a steely rock being shaped by a giant axe, flowing lava hidden within every single line. As for his eyes, they were peaceful as the depths of the world— gloomy, ice-cold, and bottomless.

A fleeting thought passed his mind as Richard turned his gaze towards his lower body. His member was already standing upright, ready to thrust and conquer at any moment. It still had room to grow in the future, but it was extraordinary even now. Laying eyes upon this proud, lethal weapon of his, a trace of a long-forgotten smile surfaced at the corners of Richard's mouth. He was already a man.

At that moment, Erin's sharp and clear yet serious voice suddenly sounded next to Richard:

“Yes, just last night.”

His body immediately started to shake. He raised both hands in an attempt to cover his ears, but put them down mid-way. He knew; no matter how hard he tried, this conversation would play

out to the end once more.

“Why?”

“I need money.”

“I have plenty.”

“But I don’t want yours.”

He stopped looking at himself in the mirror, instead taking big strides towards the laboratory even as the conversation continued to ring out in his ears. In the corner of the laboratory was a steel doll, crafted for him to test the might of his spells. Right now, however, it served as a whetstone for his fist. This was what he did whenever his heart burned so painfully that he couldn’t contain it; using the doll to build his physical strength even as he tormented himself. This time was no exception.

Richard walked towards the steel doll, standing in front of it as was his usual practice. His legs were a shoulder-width apart, the perfect stance in preparation for a fight. He took a deep breath as he looked at the steel doll, its bright and clean surface clearly reflecting his face.

For some reason the sight of his face on the armour overwhelmed him with an uncontrollable surge of wrath. He loathed himself to the core, detesting how he hadn’t realised Erin’s embarrassment even more earlier. Instead he’d just indulged in his own loss, silently waiting for an outcome he couldn’t accept! His wrath set his veins on fire, and his blood boiled as it turned into waves of lava that crashed into the top of his head.

The burning blood suddenly bestowed upon him an endless strength. Every vein, every artery was so close to bursting open under immense pressure, and every energy channel of his meridians seemed to be broken by the gushes of blood. Richard let out a crazed, bestial roar and raised his fist, pounding it fiercely on the steel doll’s chest!

The refined steel caved in, leaving faint cracks on the surface of the doll. Richard's entire forearm made its way through the doll's chest, so strong that a subtle whirlpool of power formed as he clenched the doll tightly in his fist. The object got deformed further and further, and by the time his newfound strength was completely gone, he'd managed to throw the doll out behind him and crush it against the wall.

This was a standard magic doll, designed to emulate a knight wearing half-body plate armour. The damage done to it meant Richard's single punch was strong enough to kill an elite knight in one shot, able to compare to the weakened fireball in terms of damage.

That was how, on the day autumn gave way to winter, Richard Archeron awakened his first bloodline ability: Eruption.

Winter passed just like it should have, a somber and desolate time for every being in the plane. Even the creatures that could survive freezing climates preferred spring and summer, because that was when they could seek out food, mate, and store up in preparation for late autumn and the next winter.

To Richard, however, there was no difference. The young bird staring at the world with an inquisitive gaze had shut its eyes completely, sealing off its senses. He no longer concerned himself about anything else in the outside world, only devoting himself entirely to the world of magic. His mana growth remained insane, and he even achieved 24 points of peak mana to exceed level 3. Nearly all of Richard's professors grew wild with joy over his improvement.

There was one exception, the maestro who taught him art.

Every painting the boy submitted made him feel more and more suffocated. It was all sketched plainly, drawn stroke by stroke with a fine quill pen. His art had paid particular attention to the composition of light and shadows at the start, portraying all kinds



of characters. The man had taught him that portraits were the soul of art, but the people in Richard's art pieces grew fewer and fewer in number even as the environments grew more stifling and depressing. By the end the paintings were better off without any life forms in them, and even the scenery was gradually blurred. In the eyes of the maestro they'd only grown more powerful than before, like the surface of a dark ocean whose gentle waves didn't warn of the upcoming storm.

Sometimes, the master couldn't resist but analyze the lines in great detail. Every single sketch, every coil, every smooth line seemed to speak to him like a soul crying out from the depths of hell, each stroke holding great power. The artist couldn't imagine how Richard felt as he painted them, and one day the man who was a mere level 12 mage found himself unable to bear the impact of these images.

It was his duty as a tutor to seriously examine every single painting that Richard had submitted, but the light in Richard's paintings was growing fainter and fainter. The backgrounds were growing more fuzzy, huge shadows starting to devour large areas. There finally came a day when Richard submitted a 'painting' that was just messy lines. He'd smashed every single object he could destroy in the studio!

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There were two trivial matters in the winter that slightly disrupted Richard's life.

First, Richard had encountered that young mage called Steven once again during one of his lessons. The youth was so cordial and elegant that there was nothing one could criticise him about, fully exhibiting the etiquette of a child of nobility. As he was also another of Sharon's personal apprentices, it was only natural for the two to not be estranged. Another of the legendary mage's students was present as well, Minnie. The girl was usually reserved and dispassionate, but this time she was quite lively as she actively

participated in the conversation after listening for a while, bringing some topics up herself.

Both Steven and Minnie were quite accomplished in their study of magic, so their discussion didn't stray far from the field. Although Richard normally didn't wish to speak to anyone, discussions about magic were an exception. He had to bite the bullet, chatting with them for a while. Thankfully the lesson started soon, so he managed to return to solitude quick enough.

Throughout that conversation he'd been able to feel a subtle hostility from them. Although they concealed it very well, Precision caught the tiniest movements of their limbs and his intellect allowed him to analyse the meaning of those gestures.

It was normal for rivalry to exist, and practically everyone in the Deepblue except Sharon and Erin viewed him with some amount of hostility. However, he didn't understand why Steven or Minnie would see him as a threat even though their family backgrounds were much greater than his own. In any case, they weren't actually important to him so they'd been mostly wiped from memory by nightfall.

The other trifle was that he had seen Erin again. It was just a glimpse of a silhouette far away in the trading area near the bottom level, where it was bustling with people. She had only flashed by, but Richard knew that it was her. Erin was accompanied by a guy who was openly grabbing her waist, and they seemed very intimate. It didn't matter where they were going or what they were doing, because it was crystal clear that what had to be done was already done; it made no difference even if it was any more or less.

Richard didn't chase after her, nor did he take a second glance. The young man next to Erin seemed to be Steven, but he didn't care to continue along that line of thought either. Whoever it was was no longer important: Richard erased her and the man from his mind relatively easily.

It was still difficult to forget everything, but there were many ways to stop the pain. This was perhaps one of Richard's takeaways that winter.

# Book 1, Chapter 25 - Breakthrough

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The two ‘trivial’ affairs— especially the scene he’d witnessed of Erin being intimate with another man— had actually greatly affected Richard. It was just that he had no clue of the extent of it at the time.

The next morning, the entirety of Floe Bay was still in a deep slumber. Winter was passing and the solstice was coming soon, so there was still time before the sun would appear. Still, this didn’t affect how brightly lit it was outdoors. Icicles filled the ground, the hills, the vegetation, and the river’s surface. Everything was frozen solid, reflecting blue and white light everywhere. Only the surface of the sea in Floe Bay was still rippling with waves.

Richard couldn’t sleep. Stood in front of the full-length window which was more than 10 metres tall, he silently observed the magnificence of Floe Bay in all its frigid and desolate glory. Spitting out a mouthful of foul air that he had kept repressed inside him, he suddenly felt as though his horizons had been widened and he had grown more open-minded. It was as though he could practically contain the entirety of Floe Bay within him.

The past few seasons had only left faint traces of darkness in such a massive space. Perhaps these feelings of gloom would linger in his own mind for a long time to come, or perhaps he would feel the ache whenever he thought of them for the rest of his life, but what followed every memory of suffering and pain was wealth.

Richard began to open his eyes and observe the world around him. The first thing that caught his attention were the various kinds of people in the Deepblue. He’d interacted most with his mage professors, and by now they weren’t refined machines that sputtered out knowledge any longer. Instead, they were living humans, elves, dwarves, even drow.

These mentors had their own share of emotions, and demanded

their own benefits. They regarded everyone differently, and didn't treat everyone the same as well. Every single action of theirs led to a different conclusion in Richard's reality: waving a hand, throwing a kick, raising an eyebrow, or even adjusting their gaze. Even the same phrases, when spoken in different languages with different intonation, had different meanings behind them. Richard's understanding of his teachers grew with each passing day, and he observed them with great detail, adding on to the number of samples in his memory that he could use for comparisons. He suddenly realised that most of his mentors' words and expressions actually had hidden meanings behind them, which he was still gradually discovering.

The professors came from various fields, so their relationships were different as well. Some of these fields were located near each other, while others were probably worlds apart. Those who came from similar fields often didn't share good relationships, and those like Popovich and Riley explicitly trampled on each other's words. On the other hand, the ones who came from fields that had nothing to do with each other were on much better terms, and some of them were even close friends.

Contemplating these newfound observations of his, Richard discovered that the key to all these relationships was competition, something governed by benefits called coins.

After he opened his eyes, Richard gained more knowledge. For instance, he now finally understood why so many geometry, mathematics, drawing, and magic formation lessons had suddenly been added into his curriculum. He also found out about his future status as a saint runemaster.

'So Master wants to groom me into a runemaster...' Richard thought to himself. Although he was a youngster who had grown up in the mountains, Richard's horizons had widened substantially after spending more than a year in the Deepblue. He was no longer that young boy who had no clue about how things worked.

However, although the position of a runemaster surpassed many others, it was as insipid as water in Richard's eyes. The boy had no idea how the decade of Elena's implicit influence turned him indifferent to privileges or humiliation.

Regardless of his thoughts, he wouldn't let his Master's expectations of him go down the drain. Children who grew up in the mountains were often stubborn, but they were also clear about their preferences and dislikes. Richard was very intelligent, and having been exposed to a great deal of suffering and twists and turns in his life he was more mature than his peers. Now he knew well he had a special position in the Deepblue, and even better about how many people would go wild over the amount of 'delight' that he received from his master every month. Many gazes levelled on him came with hidden motives, containing envy, longing, and a desire to rob him of everything he had. Yet those kinds of people kept a distance from him, not daring to conspire against him as they wished. The incident with Papin was an accident; he was just one of those noble children who knew not how deep the waters he was treading in were.

He also realised that a couple of people always tailed him from a distance, wherever he went. Perhaps it was because of how those giving him the harsh, malicious stares always retreated in fear, or his own gut feeling, but he knew that these were protectors, not spies. Thinking of how carefree and thrifty his master was, these actions caused him to feel faintly warm and fuzzy. This was the only source of warmth that Richard received this winter.

Fortunately his studies weren't affected at all even during these confusing times, and he instead made leaps and bounds in his magic progress. The newfound thoughts of his gave his maturing self some reassurance.

The winter passed as it should, and spring was somehow here again. After completing his studies for the day, Richard dragged his lethargic body back to his residence. When he passed by the

steel doll that was standing upright and alone in a corner, he suddenly realised that it was his birthday again.

Apart from its intact head, the rest of the steel doll had already been distorted so severely that it was deformed, and it was practically impossible to envision how it used to look. This was the result of the numerous times that Richard had lashed at it with Eruption activated. The wall around it was also covered in bumps of all sizes, traces of the doll having rammed into it.

Richard walked next to the doll and gently caressed the motley indentations of all sizes. Some of the dents had pointed edges and razor-sharp crevices; it wasn't just his fists that left these marks, but also his elbows, shoulders, knees, and even his head. Some of these dents were even tainted with dried-up bloodstains.

After experiencing the faint feeling of pain from his fingertips and seeing the patches of bloodstains, Richard finally understood how he actually wasn't lonely at all throughout winter. He thought he had spent it occupying himself and passing the season in silence, but the pain was always lingering around. It was just hidden so deep that he nearly thought that he had forgotten it.

The head of the steel doll was in perfect condition. Its squeaky clean and round surface reflected Richard's somewhat changed face, but the rest of it was utterly destroyed. Most of the parts were only held together by thin wire at this point, ready to disintegrate with just another blow to the main body. Richard smiled and patted the doll's face, before taking big strides towards his bedroom.

The next day's curriculum included a drawing class. After listening to an entire lesson about the theory of art appreciation, a dozen students courteously submitted their rough sketches, which were assigned as homework, before leaving one after the other. Richard was the last one to step forward.

For some reason the maestro felt extremely uncomfortable even

if Richard still looked like a teenager. He subconsciously averted his gaze, the mere thought of Richard's drawings making him feel like a moist, freezing creature was pressed up against his body. He couldn't shake it off no matter how hard he tried, making him very upset.

The man's gaze swept across the assignment that Richard was about to submit, and he heaved a sigh of relief when he realised that it was just a small drawing in a 30-centimetre-wide square.

It was a scenic drawing, depicting Floe Bay during winter. Through his usual brushwork, Richard had illustrated the bitter winter in its somber yet exceptionally magnificent beauty in great detail. In comparison to his previous works which were ominous and hysterical, this drawing finally marked a rare return to Richard's normal works. However, the power contained in the lines of this drawing still sent a faint chill down the mage's spine. After letting out a relieved sigh, he suddenly realised that Richard's gaze was still fixated on him. The boy's bottomless pupils were like blue gems.

"Does this painting look a lot more comforting?" Richard's gentle words actually caused the maestro to break out into a cold sweat. He instinctively jumped up from his seat and almost tripped over the edge of his robe. He couldn't be bothered about how unkempt he looked, and wagged a finger at Richard, "You... You...."

In contrast, Richard was as cool-headed as an iceberg. A graceful and beautiful smile was plastered on his face, yet it looked like the enticing expression of a devil trying to lure him in. But no matter how attractive the devil's murmurs were, the maestro knew that there was a much more painful price to pay behind it: his soul would be lost in the deep abyss forever! Upon seeing that rare smile on Richard's face, more beads of cold sweat started to drip down the man's back. What frightened him the most was this— if he didn't remember wrongly, Richard had only just turned 12!

The level 12 mage wanted to question how Richard had read his



mind, but even if the words were at the tip of his tongue he held back. Regardless of how it was that this pupil of his had found out, he knew it all. The man calmed himself down, realising Richard still had more to say. He was only a 12-year-old child, yet it was so hard to fathom him. These paintings were constant reminders of how crazy it was in this young boy's inner world.

The great artist took a deep breath. He straightened his clothes, adapting the proper demeanour of a teacher before sitting down and motioning for Richard to do the same. The boy didn't take a seat, however, instead greeting him with a respectful bow just like any other acolyte consulting him about schoolwork. He then asked gracefully, in a practised manner, "Professor, first of all I would like to ask about how the world of a runemaster looks."

The maestro was stunned by this question, but he shook his head in reply, "I'm no runemaster, just a useless level 12 mage. If you want knowledge about runecrafting ask grand mage Fayr, he teaches you as well. You could try Professor Huru as well, either of them has much more knowledge of runes than me..."

Richard interrupted the maestro, "No, I'm not looking for professional knowledge about runecrafting. I want to know more about the outside world: what a runemaster does, what duties they have, and how they live their lives. I'd also like to know which runemasters are famous right now, their lives before they made a name for themselves, their past achievements and so on. Professors Fayr and Huru both spent most of their time in the Deepblue, and aren't well-traveled like you are. You were also an honoured guest at the royal families of the three human empires at one point in time, so you must certainly know more about these matters than others."

Richard's question startled the man once again. He didn't understand why the boy wanted to ask about stories that had nothing to do with the matter at hand. Or rather, he'd thought of a possibility but felt like that was rather unbelievable. Conventional

logic stated a 12-year-old wouldn't be considering things like that. He still asked out of prudence, "Why do you want to know about all this?"

"I want to become a runemaster, so I need to know about what the world of runemasters is like, and how I can gain an upper hand in that industry. Learning about the lives of historical and actual great runemasters will tell me about the setbacks and experiences that they once faced. At least I can learn from history and refrain from making the same mistakes that they did." Richard replied. After a short pause, he added, "The world of a runemaster is probably different from what bystanders see."

The great master instantaneously broke out in cold sweat once again. This was precisely the possibility that he had in mind.

Now, he couldn't decline Richard. He was also willing to impart his knowledge to this young child in front of him, just because he felt like it. After those silent exchanges with Richard through his drawings all this while, he felt that the boy was rather different from the rest of his students.

He organized his train of thought, and slowly said, "Alright. Firstly, in my opinion, runemasters aren't the creators of miracle, instead the weavers of nightmares. They're the very reason that rune knights are armed to the teeth, able to crush forts, checkpoints, and mountain passes that were once considered infallible to smithereens under their iron hooves. Their appearance turned the world around, substantially accelerating Norland's expansion into other planes. Without them, the world wouldn't be the same, and so many lives wouldn't have been lost..."

"In other words, the runemasters are actually the creators of the war corps," Richard interrupted the artist, concluding his words concisely. The man sighed with deep sorrow.

"You could say that. But..." The great master was reluctant to

have Richard arrive at such a conclusion, and he struggled to justify himself. However, after much consideration, he couldn't help but say, "Fine, you're right. It's just like how legendary beings pose a fatal threat to royal families and other nobles. Legendary beings, regardless of occupation, can become the most dangerous of assassins. On the other hand, runemasters are held in high esteem because they can destroy countries. A small troop of rune knights can defeat a large army of thousands of people regardless of how small they are.

"Now, let's start with Lord Rodandar. He was the first runemaster in the continent who actually had a sense of justice..." The maestro's retelling was concise and animated. His few words made it seem like a once-almighty runemaster was standing right before Richard's eyes.

Runemasters made use of their wisdom and talents to create countless troops of rune knights, each branded with the mark of the runemaster who created them. All runemasters had vastly different creations, allowing one to exhibit their personality and innate talents at will. The most famous runemasters of history had left behind their own masterpieces, like Lommen's illusory suits, Ricardimo's crimson knights, or Saint Peter's holy equipment. Although these things had eventually been copied, they were never surpassed.

It took an entire hour for the maestro to draw a clear outline of the history of runecrafting. Had he spoken in any detail, it would likely have taken him ten days to a month.

Richard spoke once again after the maestro took a break, "Thank you, Professor. My second request is that you introduce me to someone."

The artist nodded and replied, "I know of a lot of people in the Deepblue, one could say I know most of the special ones. What kind of people do you want me to introduce you to? Women? Haha!"

The maestro's joke didn't elicit a smile. Richard instead lowered his head, keeping silent for a long while before he looked back up with determination in his face, "I'm looking for someone who can teach me how to kill."

# Book 1, Chapter 26 - The Art of Killing

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“What?!” The great mage suddenly felt his entire body turn cold, as if he had jumped outside the window into Floe Bay, naked. He had never imagined Richard would ask him something like that. While this boy was more taciturn than the average child, he was still a twelve-year-old who was diligent and ambitious. Here he was, wanting to kill someone?

All the works of art Richard had drawn before appeared in the great mage’s mind in that moment. The boundless strength hidden within them... the great mage realised that he was wrong in treating Richard as an ordinary little boy.

Some twelve-year-old human nobles were extremely mature, while fifteen was their standard for adulthood. Outside human control, some beast tribes considered children who were six or seven to be matured as well.

Coming to this thought, the maestro stood tall and asked with seriousness, “I do know someone you’d like to meet, a true expert at murder, but first tell me why you’d need to learn how to kill.”

“Runemasters are harbingers of war,” Richard answered, “Only by learning how to kill can I create outstanding rune knights.”

Richard’s answer left the great mage helpless yet again. It took him a few deep breaths, but he eventually managed to suppress his feelings and speak slowly, “That’s a great reason. It sounds untrue, but never mind that. Any reason is good enough as long as there is one. As for the person I was talking about, his name is Naya. Many years ago, most everyone called him the Blade of Calamity. You should be able to get what you want from him.”

Richard nodded, bowing primly to the great mage before he handed the man a sheet of paper. The maestro thought it was an assignment, but it was actually a proof of payment signed by Richard, showing that the great mage had taught him a certain

number of lessons. Most of these lessons didn't exist, but with this receipt the maestro would be able to get gold from the Deepblue. It would amount to over ten thousand extra, an amount he couldn't just ignore.

This process was extremely safe as well, because one-on-one lessons was something students paid for themselves. The Deepblue would check with Richard for this, and if there was no harm to their finances, they naturally would not pursue this matter further.

Seeing this proof of payment, the artist's mage went into chaos. Was this a bribe?

"Richard!" he called the boy who was about to leave, grabbing his messy hair to ask, "Why ask me for help?"

"Because I thought it would be the easiest way."

"Then what if I didn't help you? Who would you look for help from?" The grand mage did not back down.

"Blackgold."

The great mage suddenly understood. In little Richard's eyes, those who worked in arts and played with gold were both quite unreliable, which was why he had chosen this place. However, he was very curious about something else, "Who will you look for if this doesn't work out?"

Richard answered instantly, "Those grand mages who only want to teach students!"

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Late into the night, Richard left the Deepblue's main towers to arrive at some buildings at the borders.

There were many mages within the main towers, with at least twenty to thirty people serving them each. This pushed a lot of people into the surrounding areas, because the rent in the main

towers wasn't something any mage below level 10 could afford. Even a little room with only a bed was impossible to get.

The external districts were graded into different regions based on their distance from the main towers. The ring closest to the Deepblue had many mages, most of them below level 10. They didn't have the means to stay in the Deepblue itself, but they could somewhat settle in the outer regions with difficulty.

Covered up in a dark cloak, Richard weaved his way through numerous districts to reach the outermost one. He sensed all sorts of gazes trained on him on the way, some from arrogant level 8 mages and other malicious ones from shady characters.

Most were of curiosity. After all, those who wandered these districts were acquainted with each other or at least had seen each other before. That made strangers very eye-catching. It was the marking of a level 3 mage on the cloak that helped Richard avoid a great deal of trouble.

At the end of an alley that was dark and devoid of people stood a worn-out little tavern. There was a huge gash on its wooden signboard, where one could barely make out the crude image of a half-naked woman. The door was ajar, revealing the dimly lit and quiet interior of the tavern without any bards. The only thing that made it outside was the pungent smell of alcohol.

It was now winter, and the harsh cold was everywhere. The Deepblue had its magic to keep the inner regions warm, another factor leading to the high rent in the place and the arrogance of the residents, but a small alley outside the main tower like this was very cold. With a tavern of this size, even if it supplied heating that would only make it slightly warmer than the outside; an entire month's profits would not be able to support keeping it at room temperature for a day.

The bit of warmth was quite substantial in Richard's senses, but most ordinary people did not find much of a difference between

-30 and -50 degrees celsius. In such terrible weather and with such a remote location, this tavern obviously would not have many guests.

Richard pushed the tavern door open and walked in. The tavern was not very large, with only three tables, and the bartender was a man of average physique and appearance. His half-grizzled hair was beginning to show his age.

Two tall, sturdy men dressed in tattered clothing were sitting at a table in the corner, leaning comfortably into the wall as they ate and drank bit by bit. The alcohol smelled strong, which meant it had come cheap. Paired with that was a small plate of an unknown sliced meat, so dry that it seemed to have no water at all. Just the sight of it could make anyone lose their appetite, but these men were ever so careful as they picked it up piece by piece, chewing and trying to appreciate the taste before they took several large gulps of the strong alcohol. It was just a small plate, but by the looks of it they wouldn't finish it by the end of the night.

Richard took a look around, understanding the situation here soon enough. The man behind the bar cleaned a glass while shooting Richard a glance, "Little guy, didn't your mother tell you that you can only drink after you become of age? Of course, if you have the money, I wouldn't mind pouring you a glass or two."

Richard lifted his hood and spoke, "I'm not here to drink. I'm looking for someone."

"Who?" The bartender seemed interested.

"The Blade of Calamity." The moment these words left his mouth, Richard felt like he'd fallen into an icy cave. He froze so stiff he couldn't even move a finger, and all parts of his body except his head stopped listening to him. The chilly air assaulting him pierced his skin sharply, feeling like the pinpricks of millions of needles. This was the first time in his life Richard had been exposed to killing intent.



It was like time itself had stopped. The two men by the table halted all movement, maintaining their poses. One was stuck pouring the drink down his throat, while the other still had a piece of meat that was so thin it seemed translucent held high in the air.

However, they didn't seem immobile like he was. While their movements did stop, their gazes locked on to the boy. Their expressions said nothing.

The man behind the bar stopped cleaning a glass, gazing at the flickering candles on the wall. It took him a moment to return from his memories, after which he turned towards Richard, "That's a name I haven't used in a long time. Call me Naya; anyone who knows about the Blade of Calamity is a friend. I'm curious, though, what does a child want with me?"

"I want to learn how to kill." Richard's words were to the point, just like always.

"Why?"

"Because I feel like I'll need the knowledge soon."

Naya nodded, not pressing him further. He switched tracks, "This is the Deepblue, even if it's an outer region..."

"I've prepared the fee." Richard answered.

The corner of Naya's lips curved as he smiled, the icy sting of the killing intent disappearing, "My lessons are expensive. I'll need at least 500 gold coins everyday."

Richard produced an intricate magic pouch, opened it, and poured out a pile of flickering gold coins onto the bar counter. "I've prepared a thousand, so teach me everything you can."

Naya nonchalantly glanced at the pile of gold coins in front of him and chuckled, "Isn't a prepubescent child with so much money unafraid that I'd gobble you down, seeing as you ran into the nest of a killer? I'm guessing that guy who loves drawing women introduced you, but that guy is a spineless person and can't

be trusted. So, tell me why I shouldn't kill you right away."

"Because I only brought the gold coins for today."

Naya grinned even more brightly, "Smart kid! But it's best if you give me another reason. Sometimes I do things for money, but other times not so much. For safety's sake, it's best that you don't assume that I just want that bit of money."

Richard hesitated for a while before speaking again, "My name is Richard, Richard Archeron. I'm a personal apprentice of Her Excellency Sharon, and the son of Gaton Archeron."

The smile on Naya's face froze, and he suddenly coughed out some spittle, yelling at the two men at the table, "What do you say, guys?!"

The man on the left put his glass down, "Those two are maniacs! If you do anything to this boy here, Gaton will drag you out of hell if need be, and Her Excellency will make sure you regret ever having lived for the next thousand years."

The man on the right placed the meat back on the plate and looked at little Richard, saying, "Don't you think this little guy is interesting? Teaching a little guy like him must be very fulfilling and profitable! If you think you're earning too much, pass him to me. It's been over a decade since you were the Blade of Calamity anyway, who knows if you can still move that blade quickly enough anyway. I need money now!"

"You can keep dreaming, Redbeard!" Naya yelled, swiping all the coins on the counter into his pocket like he was afraid they'd go away if he was too slow. His gaze on Richard changed slightly, "What I'm going to teach you isn't just how to kill someone, it's how to destroy a life. We start now."

.....

It was early morning when Richard returned to his residence. He saw the steel puppet that was ridden with wounds on the way to

his bedroom, and the eye-catching head devoid of any damage. He stopped to gaze at it for a while, before sighing suddenly and muttering to himself, “I won’t need you anymore in the future.”

He brushed past the puppet, his left hand barely discernible as it brushed the puppet’s neck before he headed towards his room.

With a clank, the puppet’s head silently detached from the body and crashed to the ground, flying a far distance. The cut at the neck was as smooth as a mirror, like it’d been sliced by a sharp blade.

# Book 1, Chapter 27A - The Power to Change The World

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Spring arrived once more, and Richard was about to turn thirteen. Of course, the boy did not know that this spring would hold a special meaning for him.

As controllers of war, it wasn't truly important for runemasters to kill with their own hands. This was especially true for someone at Richard's level. However, every night he spent in that little tavern in the outer regions gave Richard a newfound understanding of magic formations, dimensions, or his other homework. What had originally been a bunch of static numbers now connected, everything affecting everything else not just in the moment, in that place, but elsewhere and other times as well.

The fireball spell formation was a simple example. Its instant attack was the same whether it was used in a desert or a forest, but over three to five years the formation would increase the fire elements in a desert. Oases would shift several kilometres away, perhaps drying out further as well. On the other hand, a large formation would burn many trees away in a forest, reducing the density and variety of the greenery. However, once the trees burned to ashes the wind would spread their seeds elsewhere. The soil would recover over time, growing fertile once more.

Such long-term effects were useless in a single battle, but over a prolonged war that lasted more than a century these things could affect the development of societies and entire races. It gave Richard a proper understanding of what runemasters were, of what they did and why they were called controllers of war. However, even he himself was in disbelief of such a thing. Such thoughts could be coincidental, but pure logic told him it was more probable that excessive fatigue was causing him to hallucinate.

One certain night, he found himself unable to sleep. All his

experiences from childhood till date suddenly surged to the front of his mind, and the huge amount of knowledge he'd gained in the Deepblue merged and linked to answer many questions he'd had in the past. Inspiration surged like a spring, while his heart began to pound quickly.

He suddenly sat up and charged into his laboratory, preparing over a hundred items in one go. He spread the hide of a high-level beast out, taking a few magic pens with special mithril tips to begin carving a magic formation.

The night silently passed, but the rays of magic never faded, causing one to lose track of time. Switching through twenty two different types of magic pens, damaging six, and using no less than 200 different types of magic ingredients, he finally managed to draw a complete magic formation. The square hide turned extremely rigid, and the rays of light from the formation itself circulated around it. As long as Richard pushed his mana inside, the spell formation would activate automatically to increase his innate agility.

Once he saw this hide, Richard himself couldn't believe his eyes. This was the result of his entire night passing like a dream, and if one ignored the material issues and small flaws it had it would garner another name in the outside world.

This was a rune! Although only the most basic of runes, Elementary Agility, it was a rune nonetheless!

He may have learnt all the theory and the foundational subjects systematically over the past years, but Richard had yet to start on making runes. Although this rune had a lot of room for improvement, and was almost useless, it was a substantial improvement for him personally! Once a mage could cast a spell of a certain grade it wouldn't be hard for them to learn other spells of that grade, and the same was true of runemasters and runes!

Holding this crude rune, Richard's mind was filled with all sorts

of thoughts. His hard work, his conjectures, the suffering... it all came to mind. All that time of being unwilling to waste a single moment, working hard bit by bit, had finally come to fruition. The pain and fervour that he'd hidden deep in his veins had pushed him to success.

If one wished to find the source of his motivation now, it could be seen easily with three words: success follows accumulation.

All sorts of feelings welled up in his mind, but Richard only allowed himself three minutes to dwell on them. He knew full well that everything in the Deepblue was built up high in the clouds, where his dreams could be destroyed in an instant.

The massive fees, the great amount of materials he needed to use, the mana potions he drank like water everyday, and this residence that was so huge he felt uneasy living in it... It was all built on Sharon's Delight. Put bluntly, Richard's life depended on the legendary mage's moods. Before his talent gave way to true power, he was just like a painting on the wall, something that could only be admired not used.

A proverb had made it down the annals of history: there was no free lunch in the world. This lunch that came from a legendary mage, so rich and ridiculous, how could it possibly be free?

Naya's reaction had told Richard that the father of his, who he hated to the core, was definitely someone well-known on the continent. He'd also learnt that people feared Gaton Archeron far more than they liked him. That background gave him some conjectures as to the source of Sharon's Delight. Of course his own hard work was a part of everything, but Gaton's influence had a hand in it as well.

Richard knew full well that everything he owned, including the money he was planning to use to help Erin get through her tough situation, had actually come from his father; the man who he was once curious about, but was now unwilling to even recall.

However, he could not just reject all this. It was impossible to continue down the path of magic without a great amount of wealth to support him. With how stubborn he was, he would definitely return all the money he had gotten from Gaton with interest before he could fulfil his mother's wishes and never see his father again.

Or perhaps one day the father and son would meet again, on the battlefield in another plane. After all, the world was filled with inconceivable events.

However, Richard had learned a lot from his philosophy classes. Even if he was set on returning everything in the future, with interest, would that mean he could use Gaton's gold as he wished now? Many would perhaps have no qualms with this, but he could not do so. Deep within his blood was an instinctual pride that came from both his parents, and this pride told him he couldn't cheat himself so shamelessly.

Now, however, this rune was a turning point. This thin piece of hide was proof that he could create standard runes quite soon, and developing from Elementary Agility into other basic runes. Even as someone who was used to living in the Deepblue the price of the most elementary runes had astonished him in the past, and now he could make money by crafting and selling them. That would make for a sizeable amount of money, even if it couldn't compare to how much Sharon was giving him in recent months.

Of course Richard wasn't so stupid as to reject that money now that he had the means to earn some himself. The extra gold would give him more ingredients, allow him to train quicker, and granted him even more freedom.

'If...' Just as this word popped up in his mind, Richard forced it down. However, he knew full well what he truly wanted to ask. If he had the ability to craft runes before, would he have been able to save Erin?

This was a young and innocent question, but instinct gave the boy a brutal, practical answer. Nothing would change. What had happened had happened, and time could not flow backwards.

As Richard studied the world of Deepblue more closely, he garnered a better understanding of the laws of the place. He was gaining greater and greater clarity about the expressions behind people's faces, growing able to see things that were once obscured by numerous veils.

Time lost was simple, but this world was complicated.



# Book 1, Chapter 27B - The Power to Change The World

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Daybreak.

The sun leapt out of the icebergs at the boundaries of Floe Bay, rising up into the sky. A bright sunshine shot through the window and diluted the rune's magic light, causing Richard's fatigued eyes to sting. He rubbed them for a bit before he stowed the rune away, leaving his residence quickly in search of grand mage Fayr who taught him magic formations. He wished to determine the next step in his studies.

Fayr definitely lived up to his title as a grand mage. He was level 19, with profound knowledge and innovative theses in the philosophy of magic coming about with fair, genuine ways. Currently his professor in magic formations, he would also teach him to craft runes one day.

Runecrafting touched on a great many things, requiring a lot of knowledge, but there was no specific path to it. A thousand years of research had separated runes into seven grades, with the first four being considered standard. Elementary runecrafting didn't qualify one to be called a runemaster, the title only going to those who could craft runes at grade 2 and above. Great runemasters could craft grade 3 and 4 runes, while anyone who could make grade 5 runes was considered a saint runemaster. As for grades 6 and 7, those runes were only conjecture as of now.

It was still rather early in the day, and few were out and about in the Deepblue. Richard controlled his heart that was thumping with joy, walking hastily away from the teleportation formation to stand at the entrance to Sharon's personal region in the upper layers.

Two giant copper gates guarded the entrance, but they were open be it night or day. There was a magic puppet on each side, and one

directed its ruby eye at Richard as it shot out a crimson ray of light. The emblem at the corner of his magic robes immediately lit up in response, and the puppet immediately returned to position as the light in its eye dimmed.

The upper layers of the Deepblue were reserved for the legendary mage, while the layers just beneath were allocated to a few greatly qualified grand mages in a display of Her Excellency's generosity, trust, and fondness. The daily lives of seventeen grand mages revolved around this area that had five full levels of the tower, and Fayr was one of those mages.

By the time Richard was allowed into Professor Fayr's personal region, the man had just completed his morning meditation.

The grand mage wore his robes before he came out, emanating a dense elemental aura. With his affinity for the elements, the sheer concentration of mana around Fayr far exceeded that in ordinary space. Just listening to the Professor speak would result in long-lasting benefits in terms of mana building, but Fayr only released this elemental aura in two cases: either he'd just completed his meditation, or he was teaching his most important student.

A tiny trace of approval flashed in Fayr's eyes when he saw Richard, hard to discern. He pointed at a chair nearby and gestured for Richard to take a seat, grabbing a mana potion and taking a few sips himself.

Richard did not sit, however. He instead produced the beast hide with the rune on it, handing it over to the grand mage, "This is something I was inspired to write last night, Professor. Please have a look."

The intricate and compact patterns alone made it obvious to Fayr that this was a superior formation. Fayr flashed a rare smile as he took the hid. Just as he was about to praise Richard, however, his expression suddenly changed. He took a few more looks, and couldn't help but begin to tremble.

The grand mage suddenly stood up in a hurry, knocking the half-empty potion in the process with his sleeve. The bottle fell to the ground, wasting a lot of the 2000 gold coins it was worth as it shattered with a crash.

The usually frugal Fayr suddenly didn't care for the potion anymore. He glanced at Richard, his eyes shining with mana as the elements entered chaos around him. He'd practically caused an elemental storm indoors!

He asked sternly, "You said you did this last night? Do you know what this is?"

The berserk elemental storm caused Richard to feel suffocated, making it difficult to stand in place. Still he answered calmly, "It's a basic buff-type rune, Elementary Agility. It's only somewhat complete."

It was only now that Fayr realised he had lost control over himself. The mage slowly retracted the elemental force he'd scattered everywhere, looking at the beast hide in his hands before he spoke slowly, "Only somewhat? Ha, indeed, as a rune it can only barely meet the standards, but few people in history could make a rune that meets the standards before the age of thirteen! I trust you aren't lying, but this just doesn't make sense. Your lessons haven't converged yet... There should be some other factors that allowed you to gain this sudden enlightenment, giving you a comprehensive understanding of the various systems of magic. If you don't mind, could you tell me of any special situations you've been in lately? It will be useful for your future development."

Grandmaster Fayr was someone worthy of respect, and Richard felt no negative emotions from him. Besides, the most important thing in this complicated and dangerous world of magic was to have a wise guide. Richard summarised everything he'd experienced outside of class over the last year, although he hid the part that had to do with Erin. He didn't even hide his studying with Naya.

Having heard all that, Fayr's eyebrows twitched. He wanted to stand up by instinct, but he controlled himself and leaned against the back of his chair before lifting his hand and indicating for Richard to stop. He then gazed up at the ceiling, deep in thought.

He spoke again a moment later, "So it's him. I never thought that the Blade of Calamity was in the Deepblue. He's called Naya now? That's his real name, something he almost never used. His teachings should be one of the prime reasons you could break the walls between the different subjects; after all killing and creation are two sides of a coin. Both need knowledge in various areas."

Richard hesitated, and then asked, "Can I still continue studying with him?"

Grandmaster Fayr sighed for a while, and then answered, "By the looks of it now, yes. The Blade of Calamity— no, he's Naya now— was once someone quite influential in the underworld. He nearly turned killing into an art, so at the very least he should be able to teach you for the next few years. However, I'm curious. Why did you suddenly get the idea to learn the art of killing?"

"To create a more powerful rune knight, I need to know the most efficient ways to kill."

# Book 1, Chapter 27C - The Power To Change The World

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Richard's answer caused Fayr to give him a long look. However, the old grand mage eventually shook his head, "That isn't your real reason, I can see it in your eyes... Forget it, I shouldn't be interfering. But know this: this is the Deepblue, and everything here belongs to Her Excellency. If anything troubles you, you can approach either me or Sharon herself.

"The Deepblue is also a world of mages, and secular power cannot extend all the way here. If the disputes you find yourself affect too much of the outside world, then you can tell your father. The Archeron Family's power has caused many people fear, and Marquess Gaton himself has begun to establish himself in Faust, the capital of legends. That means he has enough power to be at the peak of the secular world."

Richard's gaze shifted away. It took a while for him to speak, "I do not want to borrow Marquess Gaton's strength."

Aged wisdom allowed Fayr to find Richard's little secret in his addressal of the man. However, this didn't surprise him; everyone who carried the Archeron name was a strong character. Of course there were other families like that in Norland, such as Saint Peter's descendants and Wisma, Agarest, Solam, Julius and the like.

Fayr nodded and spoke in a low voice, "I actually have one more doubt... The art of killing far exceeds the limits of this domain, which was what allowed you to see the possibilities. However, to merge all 46 of the fundamental runic subjects isn't something even a genius can do. That needs diligence and wisdom; true wisdom, mind you, not intelligence. You, Richard, aren't the most outstanding in the Deepblue in terms of your wisdom. I thought you'd only be able to craft runes of your own once you turned fifteen, but you've done it at twelve. That doesn't make sense..."

Even as he asked this, Fayr knew there was no answer to this question. The fact was that Richard had taken the most important step for all runemasters, and since he met the requirements the reasoning didn't matter.

Having studied magic philosophy intensely, Fayr knew there was a reason behind this. If he couldn't find one right now, it only meant that he didn't see it yet, not that one didn't exist. Norland had far too many secrets, and the numerous universes with their innumerable planes could never be completely explored. It wouldn't be absurd if some bored god suddenly gave Richard complete knowledge of runecrafting out of nowhere. Even Saint Peter, who crafted holy equipment, revealed before his death that most of his inspiration had come from the gods.

Fayr stood up, stowing the rune away, "Nevermind, let's not waste time on trivial issues. Whatever the reason is much of your breakthrough can be attributed to luck, but luck only becomes a greater factor of your strength the further you get."

Pausing for a while, the grand mage Fayr spoke profoundly, "Richard, perhaps you still have no idea about how lucky you are. This is an open secret, so there's no need for me to keep it from you: Her Excellency has a habit of having only one apprentice in every domain, so as to continue passing on her knowledge. Her students are dazzling pearls on the crown of magic, and that is especially true for runemasters."

"So...?" Richard suddenly understood the malice that came from Steven and Minnie, as well as the reason for Randolph's plot to kill him despite them having nothing to do with each other before that.

"From what I know Steven was interested in becoming a runemaster, and he seems very resolute. However, you're already ahead of him with the most decisive step. That's the reason I told you how to take care of disputes that cannot be resolved. Remember to take care of yourself as well."

Richard could tell what Fayr was implying, but he remained in disbelief, “But this is the Deepblue!”

Grandmaster Fayr chuckled, “No matter how powerful the law is, it can only control the rational people.”

This caused Richard to bow his head in contemplation. He eventually seemed to understand the meaning of the words, nodding to Fayr.

The old mage had packed everything up by then, and some students he had summoned had hurried over, “Now, come with me, lucky boy, and I’ll show you how runemasters create miracles. I’m sure seeing this will give you a greater understanding of the world of runemasters than half-true sayings and old legends.”

An hour later, Richard and Fayr were seated within a magic laboratory situated outside the Deepblue. The place was giant and open-air, allowing the testing of large-scale magic or even legendary spells. It was normally also used as an arena for beast fights, to test new magic beasts or fresh summons.

A violent, armoured warhorse was brought into the lab arena under Richard’s gaze. This was a type of magic beast local to the Deepblue, much larger than ordinary warhorses with a layer of scales as hard as steel covering its back. The beast was untamable, its metallic hooves able to crush a polar bear’s skull while its speed and jump height could compare to mares deer. All these factors summed up to give it few natural predators.

The most valuable part of the armoured warhorse was the metallic scales on its back. They were stronger than the strongest metals in production, but still as light as feathers. On top of that they took easily to magic, not requiring too much of a complicated process to attach runes to.

In order to prevent these tyrannical magical beasts from suddenly going berserk, they had to pass through a very long, dark and narrow pathway. The moment the armoured horse entered

the laboratory, the open space that suddenly appeared before it caused it to pause. This was a huge area with a circumference of over a thousand metres, with all sorts of terrain on it. After so many experiments, the dense mana remnants and the many bloodstains from magic beasts over the years caused it to grow guarded.

The moment the warhorse paused, Richard saw that a portion of the scales on its chest had been removed. The elementary agility rune had been placed there instead, and this obviously wasn't just a simple embedding. The beast hide had been trimmed and processed, planted on the corresponding spot with meticulous care.

The armoured warhorse's snorts grew rougher, and the rune at its chest began to flicker. This was a sign that the rune had absorbed the beast's mana, beginning to activate.

Stimulated by powerful bloodlust, the horse went completely berserk! It got up on two legs and released a long neigh, beginning to charge like lightning once its hooves touched the ground. It looked like it wanted to jump over two piles of logs in its way, breaking through the border fences to regain its freedom.

Just as the armoured horse jumped into the air, the rune suddenly emanated dazzling light. The horse showed astounding ability as one leap took it astoundingly far, crossing the first pile but then smashing it into the second. This jump alone was half a fold of increased jump distance!

Wood shavings flew everywhere, and the heavy logs were sent rolling by the impact. A log that was half a metre long was the one to bear the brunt of the impact, almost being torn in half!

The warhorse grew dizzy with the impact, its head spinning as it couldn't determine its location. It started charging in all directions, the rune on its chest glowing as it further increased its speed.



However, this evidently surpassed the limits of the horse's control. It sometimes ran too far, or sometimes it misjudged the distance and crashed into the fence. Sometimes it just jumped too high or too far, causing it to lose its balance mid-air and fall face-down.

Dull thuds sounded everywhere, and pieces of wood, mud, and stone fell everywhere. The gigantic body of the warhorse practically turned into a black phantom as it darted around at unimaginable speeds, smashing right into the obstacles with its body. With its body weight and speed, the horse itself had become a terrifying weapon, the slightest of impacts causing terrifying damage.

Watching the armoured horse speeding around the lab like lightning, Richard could only gape. He was quite familiar with this often-seen beast, but he'd never thought it could reach such speeds. Seeing the terrifying power of the horse after it sped up... This was like a whole new species!

Was this the power of a runemaster?

Little Richard suddenly found his mouth going dry. He felt like he was a baby who had grabbed a metal sword, wanting to use it as a toy, but only found out after brandishing it that this sword had the power to destroy anything he saw.

# Book 1, Chapter 28A - The First Blow

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However, could he handle this strength? For the first time in his life, Richard found himself wavering.

The horse lost stamina quickly, slowing down. It was still much faster than most armoured horses, but its stamina dropped faster and faster until, after bashing into one last obstacle, it was completely fatigued. It gave a pitiful cry, collapsing to the ground with a large amount of froth at its mouth. Its hooves twitched for a moment, and then stopped moving.

Richard cried out, not expecting this outcome, and gazed with urgency at grand mage Fayr. The old mage patted him, saying, “No need to panic. An ordinary rune would only raise its speed threefold, but the one you made isn’t good enough. It’s up to a fivefold increase, so the horse couldn’t bear the rune. This was just an experiment anyway, that’s why we just forced the rune on it. If everything was perfect, the rune wouldn’t have harmed it at all. Now, I’m sure you’ve seen how runemasters can change the world.”

Richard nodded. His heart was still thumping wildly, leaving him unable to speak.

“This is a power that can change the world. Use it wisely, you in particular.” Fayr stated meaningfully and took Richard away.

Richard was given permission to rest that day, something he needed desperately. Drawing the rune had left him in a state of excitement the entire night, and he’d already lost all his strength and mana. He hadn’t been able to contain his excitement at the sight of the rune he’d made himself, but once he calmed down he felt a wave of fatigue overcome him. It felt like heavy stones were pressing down on his eyelids, leaving him unable to open them all the way. The only thing he wanted at that point was to fall asleep in place.

Fayr called a mage on shift and asked him to bring Richard back to his residence alongside two strong beings of another race. Once the mage on duty left, he thought over it once more and called a student next to him. He passed a receipt for things to buy, sending Richard a box each of powerful mana potions and energy potions from his own pocket.

This student was already thirty, and had followed the grand mage for many years. Although he only looked slightly shocked on the surface, his mind was already surging with storms. The two boxes would only have ten potions each, but each potion would be far more effective than those from the outside. While Fayr had a high rank in Deepblue, and his income matched his status, these two boxes of potions were akin to his salary for an entire month. This was the income he used not just for his own expenses, but also to operate his lab and pay his staff!

The other young students next to him couldn't hide their thoughts either. There was a lot of astonishment and envy, and only a small number were indifferent to the situation...

The testing of the rune took up the whole morning. Fayr took a look at the magic hourglass that told the time, and found that the afternoon magic philosophy lessons were about to begin. The teleportation formation in the northeast corner flickered at that moment, and Steven and Minnie walked out.

Seeing the grand mage in the distance, Steven immediately cried out, "Professor Fayr, I finally found you!" The cultured and refined youth revealed an impatience and joy that could not be restrained.

The youth ran up to Fayr, giving him a respectful bow while filled with anxiousness. It had to be said that his etiquette and bearing was outstanding amongst people of his age. Considering his great family background and splendid talent, the fact that he was even doing this was admirable. Compared to him Sharon's other two apprentices as of now were obviously lacking. Minnie often unknowingly displayed arrogance, while Richard mostly

cared for nobody and nothing. Be it in class or in break, the boy was focused on his notes and the teaching material, basically ignoring everything in his surroundings. Many who wanted to befriend him would find themselves at a loss.

“Professor Fayr, I created this last night after a sudden gush of inspiration. Please appraise it!” Steven’s tone showed his eagerness. His humble attitude couldn’t hide the pride he felt in his accomplishment, and one could not help but be curious about what he’d brought. The youth carefully opened a leather suitcase in his hands that was made with magic, revealing a hexagonal beast hide that he passed to Fayr.

This dark red beast hide had a strong smell of sulfur. There were dark patterns on it that looked like bloodstains, with the large black spots showing that it had been taken from an extremely dangerous beast—the blazing earth dragon. Exceptional sturdiness and great magic conductivity made earth dragon hides the standard materials to draw runes, useful at ranks 2 and below. The specific hide Steven took out was even more exceptional than normal, able to perhaps make a rank 3 rune in the hands of a skilled runemaster.

The hide had been tailored and processed exquisitely, evidently not Steven’s own work. At the middle of the hide was a complicated spell formation in the shape of a closed fist, exuding a savage aura.

The lines and composition of the formation made it evident that the one who’d drawn it was quite proficient, and it was good by normal standards, but the shape was still somewhat crude. Since this was a formation that fused three smaller ones together, it required a precision and grasp of the big picture that could not be measured by ordinary standards. Although the formation wasn’t complete, the occasional magic light flickering from several corners indicated that some parts of it were effective.

Grand mage Fayr scanned the spell formation on the dragonhide

for a while, nodding with slight surprise, “Elementary Strength, and it’s about... 20% complete. Hmm, not bad for your age and ability.

“This rune obviously has Saint Klaus’ style. Looks like he’s quite attentive in coaching you. I’ll have Luce study it when he gets back, and see how you can improve.”

Having said this, Fayr passed the dragonhide to a student next to him and headed for the teleportation point. The old grand mage paused when he was next to Steven, taking a long look at the young dragon warlock before saying, “Also, that dragonhide was pretty good. This is a bit of a waste.”

Escorted by a few students, Fayr’s figure disappeared into the rays of the magic formation. The skies were dark, and the wind was chilly.

# Book 1, Chapter 28B - The First Blow

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Yet to turn eighteen, and with the red dragon bloodline, drawing a complete rune would be the most important step in Steven's lifetime as a runemaster. Once a rune crossed 10% completion it was just a matter of time before he finished it. Even if he'd be stuck with elementary runes, he would definitely become a runemaster in the future.

Steven was still young, and definitely did not lack time. He'd assumed that this piece he'd spent most of the month toiling on, spending more than a million of the Solam Family's gold coins to gather and process, would completely blow Professor Fayr away. However, the response had only been lukewarm.

Had this work been handed to Saint Klaus, he would sing the greatest of praises and compliments for it. On the other hand, Fayr had remained indifferent and cold. It was like the grand mage had poured water from Floe Bay on Steven's burning heart.

Who was Luce? Steven knew that Luce was Grandmaster Fayr's student, someone who was 31 years old. He was a level 13 mage with no special bloodline, only average for his age. The work he'd laboured over for a month had been tossed to a piece of mediocre trash?

If Fayr himself acted like this, it was easy to imagine how a legendary mage like Her Excellency would act. Steven suddenly felt his heart turn cold, thinking of the dwindling income every month and feeling at a loss. Was it really so difficult to obtain the legendary mage's delight? What had gone wrong? Not considering Richard, even that piece of trash Randolph used to get a great amount before.

Steven didn't prize money, but he wanted the recognition and teachings of the legendary mage. What Sharon's Delight showed was her attitude; if he couldn't even obtain that, how would he

have the qualifications to become a legendary runemaster?

It had been around half a year since he had come to the Deepblue. In this time, Steven had not been slacking off. He would make ample preparations for each meeting with the legendary mage, all with the intent to show her his most perfect side. Some of these meetings were placed in his schedule, while the chance encounters were created by using manpower and physical resources. The time he spent on learning magic and training was a lot greater than before, and the speed at which his mana grew was proof of his hard work. He'd done everything he should've, and also gone beyond what was required of him. For example he'd done his utmost to deal with Richard, his largest competitor who'd been earmarked as a future saint runemaster. Unfortunately Richard seemed to be walled in like a rock, leaving Steven with no way to get to him.

In all situations, Steven would maintain the best manners and elegance as was becoming of the child of a great noble family. Even though there were times he wanted to punch someone's nose or tear one's clothes off, he knew the social construct of the Deepblue extremely well. He understood how everything worked and knew the temper, habits and likes of all the important people. He'd even succeeded in getting a group of friends, isolating his enemies. However, there was something a little off about the last point, because Richard had always been alone.

However, after putting in the most effort he ever had in his life, Steven had also gained the greatest disappointment in his life. Grandmaster Fayr's nonchalance had completely woken him up. The Deepblue was a tremendous and matchless monster, and he'd thought that he knew it well. However, he hadn't even seen its full appearance yet.. In a place where so many grand mages gathered, a 17 year old dragon warlock was nothing, even though he called himself a genius. There was no lack of people like him here.

One of Fayr's students was still in the lab, cleaning up the area. Seeing Steven's pale and blank look, he suddenly felt some pity.

Besides, he'd obtained quite a number of little gifts from Steven. While not particularly rare, they represented Steven's thoughtfulness. For someone from a noble family like Steven, this was very rare.

He greeted Steven, looked to the left and right to check that nobody was around, and then whispered, "Professor is very busy today. Richard gave him a rune this morning, and he spent the entire morning testing its effects. His schedule is completely messed up."

While the student's voice was gentle, the words were like thunder to Steven's ears, to the point that he found himself almost unable to stand steadily.

"Richard? Rune? What rune? How complete was it?" Steven asked with a last trace of hope. His voice was hoarse, and purposefully unkempt hair grew completely dishevelled. A few strands on went damp with sweat, sticking firmly to his forehead.

However, he knew full well that any testable rune was far more complete than just 20%. However, he knew full well that a rune that could be tested meant that no matter how terrible it was, it still surpassed his 20% by a huge amount.

The student gazed at Steven with sympathy, pointing at the carcass of the armoured horse in the distance that was being towed away by some strong men. "It's Elementary Agility, and the completeness... that doesn't actually matter. See that armoured horse? The rune has already been made into a rune slot. The experiment was a success, which means that this rune slot only needs a bit of tidying up and it'll be done."

While he'd already prepared to hear this, the answer still surpassed Steven's expectations. The rune had already been made into a rune slot, and the experiment had been a success? This was the second barrier on the path of becoming a runemaster, and that was placing a rune on the body of a particular being. However,



Richard had easily passed this barrier. Steven knew the significance of this very well. If one used the loosest of standards, Richard could now be considered a runemaster!

This information smashed Steven's bottom line. While there was still a long way to go till Richard could truly be a runemaster who could create rune knights, what was worse was that he had much more time than he did! Richard was only 12, and even if one were to say he was a year older than that, he would still only be 13!

Everything suddenly turned dark in front of Steven's eyes. All his hopes for the future, his glamour, his honour... it seemed to disappear in an instant. The huge investment his family had placed on him now only seemed cold and heavy. Steven had borne witness to Randolph's plight, and even jeered at the boy before, but soon enough it could be him in that position.

Steven grabbed at the student's hand, and because he'd used too much strength, his fingernails sunk deeply into the other's flesh. With a hoarse voice he pressed on, "Are you sure it's Richard? Richard Archeron? That little guy who isn't even thirteen yet?"

The student silently tore Steven's hand away. He could understand how Steven was feeling now and how he had lost his calm. Little Richard had given everyone a tremendous shock, to the point that even the grand mage Fayr could not keep his calm, much less Steven.

The habits of the legendary mage had long since become an open secret, which was why students in the same field would always compete and even trample on each other. Each improvement from Richard meant Delight from the big boss for all the mentors who had taught him. However, this was a huge blow to the rest of her students. With Richard's current achievement being so dazzling, the student couldn't even bear to imagine how great the blow to Steven was. To be honest, there was nothing to imagine. Just the lost look on the face of this dragon warlock who had never lost his calm before was proof enough.

Steven was in no hurry to see what he had received, and just took out a little crystal bottle which he handed to the student as thanks. This was a potent mana potion, and although it was a small bottle it would fetch at least 500 coins on the market.

This gift was extremely pleasing, and it was merely thanks for revealing this piece of news. With how intelligent Steven was, he would definitely be giving a lot more in the future in exchange for what he'd just handed over. The student kept the little crystal bottle well, the cool, smooth and exquisite feeling from the bottle leaving him unwilling to move his fingers away.

This was a day with great harvests for him: he'd witnessed the birth of a miracle, and obtained a 'little gift' that was extremely pricey. There would even be more on the way! His mood only grew better, there was nothing more he could expect. Before stepping foot into the teleportation formation, the student could not help but look up at Floe Bay's skies, thinking that the weather that day was splendid.

Steven also looked up, but all that filled his sky was grey clouds. It was the omen of an incoming blizzard...

Only Steven and Minnie were left on the large viewing platform of the lab. Minnie was stood by the formation, and only when the strong men cleared the armoured horse from the arena did she take a few steps closer to the railings to look attentively. She hadn't drawn close for Steven's conversations with either Fayr or his students.

"This shitty weather!" Steven cursed, unable to hold himself back. The beginning of spring was extremely cold in Floe Bay, and the chilly wind blew on his sweat-soaked clothes to make him feel like he'd fallen into an icy hole. He opened his palm and looked at what the student had given him, his expression even worse than before.

This was a half-charred animal hide, obviously taken from a

subspecies of some lizard. It was at least four grades worse than the blazing earth dragon he'd used, 1/1500th of the total price. The smart youth immediately understood the meaning of this: Richard's formation had been drawn on something that barely met the standards.

Everyone knew that the better the material, the higher the success and efficiency of the magic formation. The half-charred fragment seemed incomparably heavy in Steven's hands, difficult to even hold. There had always been a disparity between him and Richard in his mind, but because of this half-charred fragment, the distance had gotten even wider.

Yet another gust of chilly wind blew, and Steven's expression paled. He suddenly felt that he hated this place, this stupid weather, the stupid things, the stupid people! The only thing that he was satisfied with was that grand mage Fayr had acted appropriately while speaking to him in front of his students, and had not gone too far.

But what was the point? He'd already lost in general. What was the point of winning at trivial things then?

Steven waived his arms and signalled for Minnie to walk towards the teleportation formation, wanting to leave this place as soon as possible. Minnie suddenly asked nonchalantly, "What did he give you just now?"

Steven's body stiffened, and he gritted out, "A good piece of hide!"

# Book 1, Chapter 29A - Secret Scheme

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Deep in the night, Richard was in a dreamless slumber. Deep sleep allowed his fatigued body to recover slightly, and the powerful mana and energy potions concentrated the entire process.

The grey dwarves had a popular saying in ancient times— time was money. However, that referred to the time of ordinary people, or those in secondary planes. For people like Richard or Sharon who came from primary planes, the worth of their time could not be measured in mere gold.

Richard knew he had taken his first and most important step, something that gave him an exceptionally peaceful sleep. All the frustrations of his previous days had been vented by that armoured horse, and the boy rested without realising the extent of the shock his rune had on others and even the Deepblue itself...

Steven's residence was bigger than Richard's, the building three levels taller. In the eyes of outsiders this showed the value and affection Her Excellency had for the dragon warlock, and it was also a symbol of his identity as the child of a large noble family. However, only Steven himself knew the price of maintaining this illusion.

Richard's accommodations were completely free. On the other hand, he had to pay the full rent for this larger and more opulent residence. Even someone like Steven, who had full support of the Solam Family, was burdened by the nearly 300,000 coins he had to pay for this place's rent. On top of that, he paid twice the normal school fees. Although Duke Solam had paid off years of Steven's education in one go, the costs of studying at the Deepblue weren't that simple. Even without using special methods to calculate the monthly expenses, the huge rent on the residence alone was racking up a huge amount of interest.

The resources of a large family like the Solam Family couldn't be used on one person. The only reason he'd convinced his family to send him to the Deepblue was that they wanted a runemaster of their own blood. This was a desire any ambitious family on the continent held, and Randolph had wasted his chance like a fool before he could even begin. As a dragon warlock with the potential to become a runemaster in the future, Steven managed to gain even more resources than Randolph and he'd begun to take part in matters related to his family in the past few years, showcasing his outstanding capabilities.

However, the family expected a return on its investments. With Randolph as a precedent they had limited patience, and Duke Solam would only use two or three years to consolidate his position as a legendary being before he began a large-scale expansion.

Steven also had to bear Minnie's fees. With the marriage established, Marquess Niall had been impatient to stop paying his daughter's fees. Things were getting tense on the frontlines of the battle, and with the war affecting his own lands it was a question whether he'd even be able to hold on until the end of the next year. Ultimately, this was because the Marquess' men were too incompetent.

Of course Steven added his own uncle into the list of useless people. That man had been charged with leading the reinforcements the Solam Family had sent. Even with an absolute advantage in military strength, battling on familiar ground, their armies couldn't hold up against Alice. Forget crushing or surrounding her smaller army, they had yet to truly defeat her even once.

This woman was extremely sharp when it came to the battlefield. Her tactics were erratic, and the moment she found the opponent's weak point she would immediately strike like lightning, fierce and merciless. With less than a third the troops her opponent had, on a battlefield that was large and average in size, she'd sent the allied

forces running everywhere, tired to the bone. She looted Niall's fields, mines, forests, and towns, seizing all their resources. What she could not move she destroyed, leaving the Marquess' heart bleeding and the man unable to fall asleep.

The one-sided nature of it all had caused the surrounding noble families to grow restless. Solam's powerful intervention had cost him a corresponding amount, and with the war reaching a stalemate most of the benefits Solam had gotten from Niall had disappeared. If this continued further, he would be facing a loss.

Steven's information said the family had already decided to make peace with Alice Archeron if they couldn't take her out within a week. As for the compensation for this war, Niall would have to rack his brains.

Steven had kept his residence classy for the past half year, but now the sounds of utensils shattering rang out in the house. The elegant and intricate art pieces were smashed mercilessly into the walls or the ground, throwing fragments everywhere. Some shards even brushed past the youth's own face, leaving a few shallow bloody lines on him. The tangible and intangible weight on his shoulders was leaving him almost suffocated, and while smashing things could help him vent a little, that was only temporary. Still, venting was exactly what he needed right now, or he'd definitely go crazy.

"It's Archeron. It's Archeron again! They're a whole bunch of lunatics! Those devils should go to hell, why are they here to obstruct my way!" Steven yelled and cursed as if he was delirious, but that still wasn't enough to calm the fury in his heart.

However, there was nothing left to smash in the bedroom. The only thing remaining standing was an antique gold vase with crystals embedded in it, the most valued treasure of an emperor in another plane. Even ignoring its artistic value, if the superior purple crystals were removed from it and sold, they would definitely be worth over a million gold coins. Steven definitely

couldn't bear the cost of such a treasure; this was actually a prized possession of the Duke's that he'd borrowed so he could show off.

Steven's anger did have a limit. He could smash up a number of items, but even if Richard were to kick his face in front of an audience, he wouldn't dare even touch this one.

Minnie stood in the corner quietly, looking lonely yet beautiful. She was at an age where she was beginning to bloom, and her great figure and arrogant attitude only enhanced her youthfulness. However, her face and arms too had thin red lines on them, Steven's anger had reached her as well. The flying shards did not discriminate.

Looking at Minnie, Steven felt his anger rise further. In his eye she was no beautiful girl or genius mage, instead a huge black hole for gold. Her fees were only a fifth of his, but it was definitely not a small amount. While her residence was not as large as Steven or Richard's, it was not smaller than that of a regular grand mage. The house alone cost more than her school fees in rent. And all this didn't even include the amount she spent in training!

It wasn't all that difficult for the Solams to support Minnie. However, with Steven's own expenses reaching such an astounding number, the addition of hers would leave anyone breathless. Even a tiny stone could cause people to feel suffocated in a ship that was about to sink.

Steven knew full well that the amount of money Duke Solam had invested in him left no room for failure. All legendary beings had long lifespans, so the duke would have no lack of heirs in his lifetime. Quite a few would be talented as well.

From youth Steven's instructors had told him that he was no genius before he held true power. Countless geniuses were born each other, but only those with enough resources could actually develop themselves. Those without the talent could only possess an empty, glamorous title, and that too was only before they came

of age. Once they grew up they would truly be nothing, lesser even than the ordinary people. The glamour they'd experienced in their youths would only serve as trauma for their future lives. Randolph was the most recent example of this.

Steven thirsted for success, and was just as fearful of failure. The path he had walked had turned into one that headed straight into the abyss of hell, and retreating just one step would leave him only a horrible death.

A mere dragon warlock was not deserving of such massive financial support. His social reputation also wasn't worth that much. In terms of his abilities in managing matters of the family, this old family that had continued over a hundred generations had numerous managers. In actuality, in order to obtain the chance to study under Sharon and become a runemaster, not only had he used his family and Duke Solam's personal resources, he had also put in a lot of manpower and material power from his mother's side. Once the family chose to abandon him, he would be no better than those busy mages in the outer regions of the Deepblue, focused solely on earning money.

However, Richard loomed over this difficult path like the Augustine Mountains, 'God's Heavenly Moat.'

He'd acted of his own accord to marry Minnie, causing Duke Solam to have to pay even more. This couldn't actually be blamed on him; he was only doing things based on the laws of nobility. He'd made the right decision in that moment, the one most useful to his development in the future. It wasn't just his father's family, even his mother's and wife's side were extremely important resource. Who would have thought that Marquess Niall would be so shameless and heartless as to toss his outstanding daughter to the Solam Family?

Steven practically pasted his face into Minnie's as he yelled, "You! Tell me what use you serve to me now! I'm paying so much for your fees every month, so tell me, how can you help? Are you



helping improve my runecrafting, or in gaining me favours from Master? TELL ME! THAT RICHARD HAS ALREADY LEFT ME FAR IN THE DUST, WHAT COULD I EVEN DO?”

Seeing her stay silent, Steven found it even more difficult to suppress his emotions as he snickered, “I almost forgot that you’re a woman. At the very least, you can come to my bed. Now strip, and scram to the bed!”

Minnie did not argue, nor did she retaliate. She silently took off her clothes, lay on the bed, and spread her legs. Her expression was calm as she did this, but she turned her face to the side when she lay down to hide the tears leaking from her eyes.

She squeezed her eyes shut, but the violent ravaging she’d expected didn’t come. Hearing nothing even after a moment, she couldn’t help but open her eyes again. She saw Steven stood at the bed, holding a bottle of an alcohol bottle in hand as he took the occasional large swig. His gaze passed her body, instead settling on Floe Bay that was outside the window. The night view of the bay wasn’t pitch black, the icicles always emitting strange glimmers with no sign of life. It seemed extremely desolate and cold.

He looked at Minnie and said coldly, “You’re a smart woman. Now isn’t the time for you to show your temper or be stubborn. If I’m not successful in becoming a runemaster, everything’s over. Status, fame, money, power— I will have nothing. You should be aware of this fact. Marquess Niall has long since forsaken you, and your fate is now tied with mine. You should feel lucky, because large noble families with long histories like ours still prize official marriages. I don’t have plans to invalidate the marriage yet. Right now, you need to do something about your future to prove your usefulness to me, the Solam Family, and that you’re worthy of the 500, 000 gold coins that you spend monthly. If you can’t do it, or don’t want to, then I won’t force you to do anything. Leave the Deepblue the next month. I believe nobody would be willing to spend 500, 000 gold coins on the daughter of a defeated Marquess

who's been used before. That's for every month!" Steven was slightly drunk by the end of it all, and his last words were bellowed out.

Minnie stared up at the ceiling blankly, unmoving. Steven had spoken the truth just now. Without the Solam Family's financial support, it wasn't just her status that fell— she'd be put in a worse position than Erin! Many men would want to leave something on the body of a former lady, and her talent with magic would grow insignificant at that point.

Sharon had a saying, "There's ample geniuses in the world, it's gold that's finite."

# Book 1, Chapter 29B - Secret Scheme

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To be fair, Steven was the one who'd invested his time into this wedding agreement. Minnie blinked in a moment, finally sitting up. Although her expression was still cold, the arrogance and ridicule in her eyes had died away. A smile of mockery rose about her lips, but this time, it was meant for herself. Her two feet touched the ground and, just like that, she stood by Steven's side, gazing out of the window as he did, "I have nothing to be so proud of, but I can't give up on everything I have now. I choose to stand with you. You can treat me as a woman, a companion, a friend, or even a subordinate, but I won't be a toy."

Steven did not reply, merely narrowing his gaze on the wintry scene outside with a dangerous look.

Minnie sighed and continued, "Don't you think this situation is strange? Richard's never learnt how to make complete runes, while you're mentored by Saint Klaus and have top-notch materials to use. Even then it took you half a month with 41 failures to reach 20% completion, but Richard could make a full rune directly?"

Minnie's words calmed Steven down, and he began to consider, "You mean there's a possibility Richard didn't make the rune? No, there's no reason for Professor Fayr to lie, he has no need to be biased towards either the Solams or the Archerons. Richard should have made it himself, but you're on the right track. His class schedule says he'll only begin learning runecrafting next year at the earliest, so there must have been some decisive factor that allowed him to break through this obstacle that so many never do in an instant, soaring so high. We need to find that key factor; even if I can't use it, I could get some inspiration."

Minnie frowned, "That's going to be difficult."

"It is. Richard has practically no friends, and rarely has dealings

with people not related to him. His greatest contact is with the grand mages who are his Professors, but those guys are basically emotionless beings. This is the Deepblue, I definitely can't stalk him to see who he makes contact with. Even buying information about his whereabouts will cause too much of a fuss." Steven could not help but furrow his brows, Randolph's pitiful experiences fresh in his mind. Malice towards another of her apprentices would not gain him Sharon's favour.

"Erin! We should just ask her. Who knows, we might just get an answer," Minnie suggested. "After all, she's the only woman to get so close to him."

Steven shook his head, "Erin? What use is she? I thought she was someone Richard liked, why else would the enforcers ban her from getting in bed with him? The only reason I had her first time was because I wanted to make Richard angered or dispirited, hoping he used some fierce methods in retaliation. As you can see, though, there's no effect at all. There's no change to Richard's studies and lifestyle, and there doesn't even seem to be a change in his emotional state. Is that liking someone? So much time has passed already, and Richard must have lost his interest in her. Why would he tell such an important secret to such an unreliable woman? The situation now is different as well; if Richard finds out about me and Erin it might even have the opposite effect. After all, those old guys are obviously on his side! Don't assume they're all confused geezers!"

Minnie was not of the same opinion. "There's no harm in trying. Besides, you don't know how a woman thinks. Erin likes him a little, which is why she will definitely not tell Richard what happened between you, or at least not the details. However, she definitely knows that she and Richard have no future. After being used by you, she's even more clear about that. Since there's no hope, why not use past feelings to earn some money? That's all as long as this amount exceeds what she expected. All women living

at the district at the edges are all the same. If she really could hold on, you wouldn't have been able to get her so easily."

Steven hesitated for a moment, and then nodded. However, he then sighed and said with a hint of disappointment, "Even if I were to find out the secret, the gap it's caused is hard to be compensated for. He might only be evaluated as excellent, but that doesn't mean everything. At the very least the talent he's shown isn't much different from mine. On top of that..."

Steven laughed wryly and continued, "The resources he can use for his training far exceeds mine." Minnie went quiet.

That was reality. Richard's monthly income was no large secret, and anyone with enough power could easily learn about it. His total income wasn't exactly ridiculous, but his expenses were far lower. Steven used most of his money to pay for rent and fees for two, as well as other social costs. Removing all that, he didn't even have half as much to spend on courses, materials, and potions as Richard. Those were the true expenses that could affect one's improvements in magic. That elementary strength rune had already used up practically all his savings.

Steven took another huge swig of alcohol, allowing the liquid to burn its way from his throat to his chest. He could already feel that his efforts since entering the Deepblue had gone awry. He used to believe he'd used the perfect schemes, both openly and in the shadows, using Erin to cause trauma and seizing every possible moment to isolate his opponent. Using all his resources, he would then show his talent and strength in becoming a runemaster. However, the result had dealt him a damning blow. Using progress that exceeded his own by two large grades, Richard had won a battle that hadn't even been declared.

Steven could not help but begin to reflect on whether he had done too many useless things. Had he used the entirety of his energy and focus on runecrafting from the start, would the result have been different? Deepblue was not like the outside world.

There was no need to butter up the public, no need for status. All that was required was Sharon's Delight and absolute power.

Minnie gazed at the crestfallen face of the ambitious man next to her, suddenly feeling a chill on her naked body. Even her heart began to squeeze, and the humiliation she'd felt but moments ago gave way to freezing cold. Even if Steven gave up now he still had his bloodline and the connections from his mother's side. What did she have?

Minnie hesitated for a long time, and then said, "There might be a last option, though it might not work."

"What is it?" Steven's eyes brightened as he asked, like a drowning person who'd suddenly found some flotsam.

"Get close to Master, and obtain her favour. I've been feeling lately like she's grown increasingly unstable, so this is a very good opportunity. While she's a legendary mage, she's also a woman..."

Steven froze for a while, and soon understood what Minnie was implying. His eyes began to brighten up. Yes, the legendary mage was a woman. Why hadn't he thought of that? As expected, women understood women the best.

"So you're saying that I should try making Sharon mine?" Steven wondered, his expression slowly gaining life again to reveal the flawless smile of nobility once more. Although he lost completely in runecrafting, he had an absolute advantage over Richard in this area. It wasn't such a rare thing among aristocrats, nothing to blush over. This was another type of battle, but its stakes were no less than any other.

Determination flashed in Steven's eyes, "That is a method, but the rate of success is minute. I can't place my hopes on that. There are a few more people I can use in the Deepblue. If it's absolutely necessary, I'll make that kid disappear."

# Book 1, Chapter 30A - Tender and Delicious

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Time passed without anyone paying attention, and gigantic cracks began to form on the ice sheets north of Floe Bay. Spring had arrived, a season where the many magical beasts began to mate from gophers to dragons.

Everyone by Sharon's side could sense that Her Excellency was growing extremely strange. Her emotions were starting to fluctuate without pattern, like those of a little girl with a rabbit's heart. The grand mages in contact with her grew extremely cautious, paying attention to her every thought. Even someone like Fayr had to grow prudent. Some people guessed that these were the stirrings of love, and the grand mages who had vast experience knew that beasts were most dangerous in breeding season.

The afternoon sun was shining brightly, and the legendary mage was laid lazily on her couch as she pondered something so hard she'd even forgotten to eat her favourite fruits from beside her. She was dressed casually, the soft ivory-coloured silk gown sticking to her like a second skin.

A pair of bare little feet were rested high on another armrest, her tender skin revealing a gentle lustre akin to a pearl under the warm sunlight. This was a pair of bare feet that was extremely tempting, the tiny bit of calf they revealed enough to make the ignorant do all they could to imagine the scene deeper between those legs.

However, no ignorant people could stay by the legendary mage's side. They all chose to disregard the spring radiance Sharon exuded, no stray thoughts in their minds.

Most of the people here had followed Sharon through battles from plane to plane, while the rest had taken part in the creation of the Deepblue. They all knew her terrifying methods very well, and in their eyes the person reclining in front of them wasn't a

little woman who was so tender one couldn't resist the urge to take a bite of her. No, she was a true, ancient, dragon! Anyone without this awareness had long since disappeared into the planar storms.

The mages made their reports as per usual, but Sharon herself was obviously lazy and disinterested. Her eyes were even flickering shut.

At this moment, a servant walked in, saying that a great master in art had come to seek an audience with Her Excellency. Sharon's narrowed eyes did not move for a long while, and only when the servant was almost unable to keep this half-bowed pose and began to send helpless looks to the grand mages did she lazily nod. The maestro then approached her fearfully, artwork in hand.

As someone without the qualifications to attend a meeting with so many higher-ups, he'd never had such a feeling before. When his gaze shifted to Sharon's shining bare feet, everyone saw the master's throat move. Tens of blade-like piercing gazes immediately caused him to become aware that he had forgot his manners, and cold sweat immediately covered his body. Thankfully Her Excellency had not opened her eyes, instead still looking dazed as if she was thinking about something. She hadn't even noticed the rudeness and strong physical reaction of the artist.

The maestro came to the couch and bowed his head down, not daring to let his gaze land on any part of Sharon's body. He revealed the work he was hugging tightly to his chest, and then said with respect, "Your Excellency, your student Steven has made a portrait for you. It has great artistic value, which is why I was so bold as to take some of your precious time to hand it to you."

Sharon's narrowed eyes finally opened completely, and she began to focus. She was like a cat sunbathing as she shifted her body lethargically to look at the portrait from a better angle. The legendary mage had many pupils, and she had also obtained all sorts of strange gifts before. However, Steven was the first to give



her a portrait.

This was a half-body portrait, the background being of Floe Bay during summer. The foothills of the Everwinter Mountains had been dyed a tender green, the peaks still covered with snow year-round. The background seemed like peppermint milk, a famous dessert in Norland.

The sea was tranquil and deep, while the skies seemed lofty. Various shades of blue filled the space between them, with the legendary mage at the centre. Sharon was dressed in her favourite sky-blue robes, leaning against a parapet wall and staring into the distance.

This truly was a masterpiece!

There was no lack of portraits of the legendary mage, even once done by accomplished masters. However, all of them accentuated her identity as a legendary mage. While they would express her beauty, it was all centred around dignity and magnificence. Earlier works sketched out the scene where she battled on other planes, showing both her beauty and her cold killing intent alongside the power that caused others to bend their heads.

This half-body portrait displayed originality, and in this work she seemed more like a beautiful woman with a graceful temperament.

The background of the painting was in blue, green, and white, the purest, most tender and sweetest of the palette. They had all been handled quite well too, none obscuring the focus. If not for that robe that only Sharon wore, it would be difficult to tell that the indistinct and dispirited woman was actually a legendary mage.

The half-body portrait was ingenious. They revealed Steven's thoughts in their entirety, yet remained ingeniously vague.

Sharon's eyes finally twitched slightly, and the maestro noted the

slight change. Having once wandered through many kingdoms, mixing with courts and aristocrats, he had been a lady-killer himself. Be it young or old, he'd seen the look in Sharon's eyes many times before.

Indeed. All these years people only remembered that Sharon was a legendary mage, keeping in mind her powerful magic, wealth, and growing prosperity that could be compared to groups of dragons. Everyone forgot she was a woman; although the lives of legendary beings were very long, their state of mind would change with time. With time, they would age as per usual, then feel young again, then change again. At the end was indifference. The high-grade elves on the Norland Continent had once had this glamour, and had a profound understanding and recounting of this.

Sharon had long since entered the legendary realm, but she was still in the same state of mind as an eighteen or twenty-year-old. It was hard to tell, but the haziness in her eyes was something the maestro had seen in many young women dreaming of love. The painting had evidently had great effects.

Once, in the past, the art master had been taken in by Sharon's beauty and might, willing to give up on the colourful world outside and settle in the Deepblue. However that one-sided admiration had been dulled by time. Love needed a real basis, and once he started taking money from Sharon to maintain his lifestyle his distant hopes quickly disappeared.

He felt no jealousy at Steven's wishes. All that hard work only brought to mind the memories he thought he'd sealed away. As he pondered over them, all he could feel was sadness, a sign of age. Ten years ago, helping Steven with this would have been unthinkable even if it gave him a huge amount of gold.

Perhaps startled by the art master's gaze, Sharon suddenly opened her eyes completely. Her eyes were completely clear, shocking the master into lowering his head.

The legendary mage greedily took a look at the half-body portrait that Steven had drawn, and then beamed brightly, “This was drawn quite well. Am I actually so beautiful, though?”

“Of course! You are the most beautiful of all legends!” The maestro seized the opportunity to say this before all the other grand mages.

Sharon chuckled reservedly, and then turned to the grey dwarf, “Blackgold! Little Steven isn’t half bad. How about this, add a little of my Delight for him this month. As for the amount...”

Having said this much, Sharon suddenly saw the art master still rooted to the spot in a daze, “You should leave!”

# Book 1, Chapter 30B - Tender and Delicious

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All sorts of thoughts in his mind, the maestro didn't dare linger in the place. Knowing that Sharon would give Steven some of her Delight was enough, that piece of news would bring the youth enough joy to net even more benefits.

On the way towards the teleportation point, the maestro suddenly slowed his footsteps. He was shocked at how he'd changed; since when had he grown so philistine as to help a young noble he was not familiar with pursue someone he liked? Was it just for the money?

The man began to struggle in his mind, and a voice told him practically all grand mages were fighting for Sharon's Delight. Wasn't that all for gold? If all the great mages did that, then what did a little mage like him have to boast about?

However, rationality and experience ruthlessly reminded this maestro that the two scenarios were different. All the grand mages had their own bottom lines—they contributed to the Deepblue in their own ways to receive the rewards they did. Sharon's Delight definitely did not come out of nowhere, it was a show of acknowledgement for their achievements and hard work. These grand mages who had aged all viewed Sharon as they would a cute little girl, willing to joke around with her. Of course, there were also people working only for gold, but the common trait between them was that they were loyal to their work. Every gold coin that they earned was earned with a clear conscience. Someone with no principles definitely could not survive by the legendary mage's side.

With this thought, the art master immediately felt that the gold coins and magic crystals in his pocket were beginning to heat up. He could not help but wonder if it was this self-defeatist attitude that didn't let him create a work he was truly satisfied with in years.

In the meeting hall, Sharon continued to stare at the portrait after the maestro left. There was a complicated look evident in her eyes that caused the grand mages to exchange glances of worry. Steven's meaning was obvious, and they weren't afraid that Sharon didn't understand it. However, she was acting very strangely now, which left them uneasy. Could this legendary mage be so foolish as to be touched by this shrewd young person?

A while later, Blackgold couldn't endure it anymore and coughed a few times. Getting Sharon's attention, the grey dwarf spoke in a loud voice, "Your Excellency, you haven't decided on Steven's reward for this month."

Sharon heard the grey dwarf's unusual tone, but her eyes were still fixed on her portrait as she said nonchalantly, "Just a hundred gold coins is enough."

"This... how much?" This was the first time that the grey dwarf found himself doubting his ears. Watching how taken the legendary mage was with the portrait, even a million wouldn't have shocked him as much as this.

The legendary mage finally peeked out from behind the portrait, answering in annoyance, "A hundred! Have I not made myself clear? How much more do you want to give? Are you going to pay for it?"

"Oh no, of course not! You're joking here. How could I have the money?" The grey dwarf hastily rose his hands, frightened. The grey dwarves and the dragons had similar likes. Gold was not a currency for him, but a collectible item where more was better. Getting him to give up his money was just as painful as cutting off his beard.

The legendary mage's little nose wrinkled as she hummed, "That's fine then. Also, give that guy who just left ten thousand. This was drawn well, and he's improved quite a lot. He needs to be rewarded."

Blackgold could not understand why Sharon was gazing at the portrait Steven had given her, yet said that she wanted to reward the art master. A few grand mages seemed to be deep in thought. Based on how familiar they were with each other, they exchanged gazes and then nodded slightly. Of course, nobody thought of clearing up the confusion of the grey dwarf who lacked a single artistic bone in his body.

However, Sharon had no intentions of hiding anything. She waved the portrait in her hands around, “Look, the composition and fundamental colours all have that guy’s style, and only the portrait, layering of colours and details are different. It’s obvious that he made the base sketch and Steven only coloured a little on top. Hmm? What kind of expression did you show just now? Did you really think I couldn’t tell? I’ll remember this! Be careful of your salary next month! And you, Blackgold, it’s about time you learn art. Don’t just focus on money!”

The grey dwarf nodded hard, “Rest assured, Your Excellency! I will definitely study hard. The next time I participate in the Sacred Tree Empire’s treasure meet, I’ll definitely get a few renowned works that will rise in value!”

Sharon’s gaze returned to the portrait of herself, and she took a few more looks before sighing, “Actually, seeing this only urged me to make a decision. Alright, enough of that. Is there anything else from you?”

Fayr took a step forward and reported Richard’s studies with Naya in detail. At the very mention of the young man Sharon’s eyes brightened, and she cut in before Fayr could even finish, “No wonder Richard’s made a breakthrough in runes. So this guy has been interfering. Professor Fayr, do you think he will be a negative influence on Richard?”

Fayr had long since pondered over this question and shook his head, “No, he might be beneficial to Richard’s future.”

Sharon's eyes immediately glinted dangerously, "Someone is thinking of putting their hands on my Richard?"

Fayr hastily said, "That's not what I mean. We know that Richard will become a runemaster in the future, and it's rare for runemasters to avoid the battlefield. Learning a few dark arts will be useful for his survival."

The legendary mage then nodded, "That's true. However, Naya's actually secretly teaching my apprentice without my permission. He's still as gutsy as he was back then; the Blade of Calamity was extremely annoying. I wanted to give him a lesson he would remember, but that guy actually didn't care about his reputation and holed up like a little mouse! I left him be, but who knew he was actually hiding inside the Deepblue? Hm, good, very good, hehe, hehe, hehe!"

When the legendary mage's laughter began to sound strange, all of the grand mages went quiet. Naya was truly gutsy to dare hide in the Deepblue even after offending Sharon. It had to be said that this was both a great surprise and a good idea. However, now that his identity was made public, it would be too late even if he were to leave the Deepblue immediately. Sharon might not be the most powerful legendary, but she was the one who held the most grudges, which was why her tracking and hunting abilities were just as well-known as her magic.

Nobody really minded the Blade of Calamity's identity as a killer. All kinds of people came to the Deepblue, the flow of residents at the borders comparable to the capital of a small country. Who knew how many of the people living here had once worked in the shadows to survive? As long as they followed the Deepblue's own laws, nobody would care about their pasts. The Deepblue only upheld their own laws, and the rules in the outside world did not matter in here.

Sharon gritted her teeth and said, slightly vexed, "While the Blade of Calamity offended me before, those were trivial matters

now that I think about it. I did also look through his personal treasures decades before... Hmm, it's been so many years, so forget it. He's tactful, though, because he's teaching Richard the real things and hasn't hidden anything. That makes it a little difficult to handle this..."

At this moment, the grey dwarf took a step forward and reminded her, "Your Excellency, taxes!"

"What?" Sharon froze. It had to be said that her reactions were rather slow these days.

"Your Excellency, Naya isn't paying his taxes! He takes a thousand gold coins' worth of fees from your Richard everyday but doesn't pay taxes! That's plain stealing gold coins from you!" The grey dwarf became more agitated as he spoke, beginning to wave his arms around to emphasise what he was saying.

The legendary mage's beautiful eyebrows lifted!

To some extent, she and the grey dwarf had similar interests, and that was money. She quickly got up, exclaiming, "Blackgold! Go get Naya and all the taxes he owes me! Bring a few more people, he always has companions around."

The grey dwarf immediately straightened his back and, like an ape, began to thump his chest hard while yelling, "There's no need. I can go myself! This is the Deepblue!"

He seemed like a true warrior as he took big strides out of the room, his vigour matching that of a rune knight preparing to charge. However, the grand mages were indifferent to this all. Having worked together for almost a decade, they knew that the grey dwarf would definitely call for a dozen enforcers before he had the guts to cause trouble for the Blade of Calamity...

The discussion ended there. After the grand mages all left, Sharon stared at this work for a very long time, and then got a servant to call Richard over.



The place where Richard and the legendary mage met was a small hall that was decorated in an elegant and warm manner, rather than those thousand-metre long large halls that created a distance akin to that of mountains and rivers. The legendary mage had worn some long clothing atop her silk robe, with a collar covering her neck embedded with flowery patterns. It caused her little face to seem even younger and more beautiful.

Her long hair had now become incredibly messy, and she bunned it up with two dragon teeth. A few stray strands still fell on her rounded shoulders, however, seeming exceedingly enticing.

When Richard entered, the legendary mage was kneeling on a dark red carpet made of pure fur. Half her body was spread out over the mahogany coffee table, as she stared at a little golden magic scale in front of her eyes.

At the two ends of the scale were standard weights of different sizes. The scale was already imbalanced, the pan on the right practically touching the chassis, and Sharon was playing with an intricate little weight in her left hand, hesitating over where she should put it. This was a very small weight, tinier than any of those on the table, and looked like wherever it was placed, it would not have a decisive effect.

However, Richard soon astutely noticed the faint aura of magic emanating from the coiled dragon and demon carved on the pillar, and immediately realised that this was a magic scale. It was balanced not just based on the weight of the items, but the amount of magic within the item. It was also very sensitive to the surroundings and would react to the erratic elemental energy in the plane, which affected the balance. Hence, it could be a tool to test the quality of magic in items, and also to divine the future.

Richard stood silently and did not disturb her. He liked this sort of silence, and also liked the shocking charm that the legendary mage was unwittingly giving off. Sharon, on the other hand, only noticed him standing there after a long time. She turned to give

him a glance, murmuring “tender and delicious” before she tossed the weight to the pan that was sticking high up on the scale.

Clang! The sound of magic gold was extremely crisp, and took a long time to disappear. The little weight seemed to be as heavy as a mountain, pressing the pan all the way down to the bottom.

Sharon looked at Richard, then at the scale, and back at Richard. She repeated this a few times, her expression strange.

# Book 1, Chapter 31A - Deepblue Aria

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Every year, on the last day of April, Norland's seven moons would hang side by side in the beautiful night sky. This day was said to be a life-changing moment for many, and was known as the Day of Destiny.

The Day of Destiny was a festival celebrated by many countries on the continent, and was also common with many less intelligent tribes, especially those who practiced magic.

It was said that this was a day when all the Gods would hear the voices of their followers, sending spokespeople or even transforming into mortal forms themselves as they roamed the streets to listen to their people. The devout would receive rewards, while the unbelievers would end up empty-handed. Only those who'd crossed planes knew that folklore would remain folklore.

Nonetheless, there truly were many life-changing things on that fateful day. Alice's rune knights had broken through the combined ranks of Solam and Niall in a brilliant ambush, counter attacking the rune knights of the combined army. 20 against 18, the disadvantage to her, she'd lost only 5 knights to wipe out her opponents completely!

This was a battle that would decide the standing of both parties. Viscount Alice had put her knights on the frontlines, piercing through her opponents' defences like a hot knife through butter. A large opening was made into their steel defence, only growing larger as the battle finally concluded with her victory. Tens of thousands of men were enslaved, and about a thousand cavalry had been lost as well. The Solam Family announced their withdrawal from the battle, while Niall sent an ambassador almost immediately to start peace talks.

Military law from ancient times dictated that any peace talks were determined by the outcome of the battle just prior. Marquess

Niall ended up losing over a third of his territory in exchange for ten years of peace, giving Alice the land she needed to become an earl. The only thing left was the Sacred Alliance Emperor's decree.

The battle between the rune knights resulted in both victory and losses, but the talk of the public was of course about the huge difference in the strength of both parties, which was the main reason for Alice's victory. They would start guessing at the enigmatic runemaster under Alice from then; whoever it was, they far exceeded the famous Saint Klaus.

Alice may have been a hot topic in the southwest of the Sacred Alliance, but even more people on the continent were discussing Gaton. On the Day of Destiny, Gaton Archeron had chosen to enter the capital of the Sacred Alliance, the city of legends Faust!

The road to Faust has always been paved by metal and blood. Many tried to hinder the path of visitors, both openly and in the dark. Some just sent men to kill the new entrants directly.

This was all a rule the first emperor implemented, now a tradition of the Sacred Alliance. People without the ability to break through the defences and live through ambush after ambush had no right to step into the city of legends. It was also deemed legal for anyone to attack the territories of anyone entering Faust.

This was something that had been passed down for hundreds of years. Behind the glory of everyone who managed to enter Faust was a road filled with roses and bloodshed. People often only remembered the ones who succeeded, not those who disappeared along the way.

Gaton's decision had evoked many discussions in the continent. The Archerons had obtained the power to challenge Faust long ago, but they had never had the unity to do it. As chief, Gaton could only represent himself. Moreover he was rising too quickly, which in the eyes of the older royals was not a good thing. They thought that he lacked foundation, a word which meant many

things in contest. Secret and private planes, neverending wealth, mature rune knights, well-equipped elite troops, and talents that could be further improved. All this took time, a lot of it.

A lack of foundation why upstarts fell quickly, and in their eyes Gaton was without doubt a very stupid upstart.

The road to Faust was not a smooth one for Gaton Archeron, but he was not like the other families before him who brought all their troops to break through the defences. Instead he did the complete opposite. All his soldiers across various planes were stationed where they were to prevent invasions, and even his authority as family chief wasn't made use of.

When Gaton Archeron set off on his journey, he only had 13 rune knights with him. It was thus shocking to the entire Sacred Alliance that he appeared before the entrance of Faust right on time at noon.

This was the first time any Archeron had stepped foot into Faust, and it also signified that from this day onwards, the Archerons would become one of the most influential families in the continent.

The Day of Destiny was special for Richard, as well. At 11 in the night he was called to meet Sharon, and his gut told him this meeting would be a special one...

As night fell upon the beautiful Floe Bay, the Deepblue was brightly lit. Waves of what looked like blue smoke flowed out of various parts of the tower, ascending its sides. From afar, it looked like a elegant and mysterious blue crystal tower stood high on the far end of Floe bay. The land around the Deepblue had thousands of bonfires lit and burning fiercely, making it seem like a starlit sky if one looked down from above. The people didn't seem to feel the chilly spring as they gathered around the bonfires, singing, dancing, drinking, and admiring they once-a-year lighting of the Deepblue.

Most of these people lived on the outskirts, and the Deepblue was an asylum to them that served as a pillar of strength. As long as the Deepblue stood tall, their pride would never cease.

Yet on this night of celebration, the Deepblue itself was dead quiet. The grand mages had long since grown indifferent to the event, having seen bigger celebrations in the past. To them, the world of magic was already endless, there was no need to numb and lose oneself through these meaningless celebrations and festivals.

It was time for Richard to see Sharon. The huge magic puppets opened the heavy metal doors before Richard, revealing the spiral staircase that led up. Designed according to the liking of the higher-ups of the Deepblue, the doors were tall and simple, a deep red ochre with a natural veiny pattern. This primitive beauty reminded one of the origin; a savage wasteland of destruction and despair.

The stairs were fine and delicate, radiating light everywhere. At first look it seemed like nothing, but anyone who stared at the radiance would immediately feel dizzy and confused until they couldn't make out what material they were made of. The statues on the handrails were all intoxicating, standing out even more under the dim light as mesmerising works of art. The height of the stairs made Richard dizzy, this was already the highest region of Deepblue, and any higher would mean Sharon's personal area. Even the grand mages had no rights to enter that.

The legendary master wanted to see him in her personal region?

# Book 1, Chapter 31B - Deepblue Aria

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Richard calmed his mind down, slowly walking up a flight of stairs. An openwork door that was made of all sorts of shapes opened itself on its own to welcome him, revealing two dark elves behind it. Seeing the underground race that was legendary for its ferocity appear before him he almost instinctively cast a spell, but then he reminded himself that this was Sharon's private territory and it was impossible for there to be enemies here. The dark elves were likely subordinates she'd raised in private.

The drow clearly knew Richard, and one of them made a gesture of invitation, "Mr. Richard, please, come with me." She then led him on as the other one closed the door.

Watching the silent footsteps of the drow in front of him, fine beads of perspiration suddenly dotted Richard's entire body. Naya had once taught him to observe other people's movements; every step of this girl's was as precise as the movements of a pendulum, no greater and no less than the width of her shoulders.

The girl brought Richard into a very vast space. If Sharon's kilometer-long reception hall used for discussing business simulated an environment of mountains and rivers, then this huge space of nearly a hundred thousand square meters would be a copy of every dimension of the natural environment. There was lava, polar snow, coniferous forests, dry deserts, moist and muddy swamps... There was even a dragon's nest here!

The different regions were separated by magical barriers, each not affecting the others. Every environment seemed alive, with magic barriers of various attributes flickering with shadows of purple, green, blue, and many other colours. The shadows zoomed across the landscape, their movement so quick one could barely recognise that they were strange creatures moving about that could only be seen in bestiaries.

They passed through this area, then followed a flight of steps up another level to another door. This one was made of stone, and except for its surface being polished smooth there was nothing particularly odd about it. The girl made a light stroke on the door and it opened silently, before she refused to take another step as she signaled Richard to enter by himself.

At the end of the long, deep passageway was a dreamlike place. Numerous ice crystals were embedded on the walls here, and stars littered the dome-like sky. They emitted a blue radiance of varying brightness, painting everything in the room a fantastic blue. The floor was bright and clean like a mirror, made of an unknown material. It didn't at all feel cool to the touch, instead being warm and comfortable to walk on. Just like a mirror it reflected the starry sky, making Richard feel like he was in the centre of a galaxy looking at an endless sea of stars.

In the distance was a wall of french windows, displaying a panoramic scene of the Everwinter Mountains under the night sky. The tall, magnificent mountain range was like an ancient titan, majestic and solemn as it lay there witnessing the changes of history without participating at all.

A graceful figure was stood in front of these 10-metre-tall windows, almost undetectable in this dreamlike space. However, even if he hadn't noticed her at the start, his gaze locked on to her the moment he did, unable to shift away.

This was the legendary mage Sharon, the conqueror of planes, the dragonslayer, and the demonkiller.

Such a place, such a time, and such a woman... It all combined together to make Richard feel like he was in a dreamland, but also like he'd entered another person's memories. His body and mind experienced the vicissitudes of time, as if he'd been on an expedition for more than thousands of years in this plane.

Richard eventually suppressed his peculiar emotions, stepping



forward to ask, “You were looking for me, Master?”

The legendary mage slowly turned around, staring at him as she said, “You’re already a man, Richard, and you’ve displayed your talents and abilities...” Her expression and aura were far different from usual right now. She looked like a gentle, dignified woman, but also like a young lady who hadn’t yet lost her youth. She paused for a faint moment before asking, “Are you willing to continue on with my knowledge, advancing on the path of runecrafting?”

Richard’s heart jumped as he bowed, “Yes, I am.”

Sharon laughed as she replied gently, “You know, everything comes at a price. Until now, all of that price was paid by your father, Gatón Archeron. But I know that is not what you want, so I am offering you a chance; a chance for you to use yourself as the price in exchange for greater power. Do you accept?”

Richard didn’t answer immediately. Sharon had been casual, but he had to wonder what exactly he had that could compare to his father’s financial aid. Even if he hadn’t known originally, he now knew what ten years of Norland time in profit from a plane was; even if he sold his very life away he wouldn’t be able to beat that sum.

Richard was a smart boy, and his own intellect alongside what he’d learned in the Deepblue allowed him to recognise his own value clearly. Even ten of the current him wouldn’t be enough to nurture a runemaster, and as for the future... Even to attain Gatón’s current achievements he’d need both unrelenting effort and a modicum of luck. Just like Professor Fayr had said, luck had always been an important part of one’s strength, perhaps the most important part.

That was a cruel truth, but it was the truth nonetheless. Everyone had their value, and no matter how one insisted that they couldn’t be measured in gold others would decide for them.

There would always be a huge difference between one's perceived value of oneself and their true value, so he couldn't make such a promise before he knew the extent of his own achievements in the future.

But Richard could tell from the words of Sharon that she was... biased.

This made him hesitate even more, because deep down he knew that he already owed her so much. He would put shame the values Elena taught him if he continued to desire more and not think about whether or not he could return all these favours. The haughtiness of Elena— unique to silvermoon elves— had been passed down to him. The only reason he hadn't rejected outright was the flames burning deep down in his heart.

If he rejected Sharon's help, Richard wasn't sure if he could get enough resources elsewhere to become stronger and fulfil his mother's last wish. His father was a huge shadow towering over him, and this shadow was still expanding infinitely. He'd never thought a choice could be so hard.

Sharon walked before Richard and carressed his face, making him raise his head. This was the first time they'd made contact, and he realised the legendary mage's hand was so cold that it caused him to shiver. But Richard realised as they stood facing each other, that they were actually about the same height. Demons were far taller than humans, while the silvermoon elves were also a head taller on average. With the bloodlines of both as well as his childhood spent in the mountains, he was far taller than peers of his age. The breadfruit he ate for the first ten years of his life was actually an ancient elven prescription, while Sharon had spent a bomb on specially curated meals for him this past year. At this point he was the size of a normal youth.

The face of the legendary master looked so gentle at such a near distance, encouraging him to say what was on his mind.

“Master, I— I have nothing equivalent to your nurture. The future is still far away, who knows what would happen in three years’ time?”

Sharon let out a tender laugh, and even the magic radiance-filled room could not overpower the glistening of her eyes, “So you were worrying about that? Stubborn little thing, you’re just like your mother.”

Richard was really taken aback this time round, “You know Mother?”

“I saw her twice, and we could be counted as good friends. Elena was someone that deserved respect, and your personality is a copy of hers so I thought of her. But her and your father... Forget it, those were things in the past, let’s not talk about them. I just want to let you know that I can guess bits of what you’re thinking right now.” Her voice was calm and gentle, but it easily cracked through the walls of Richard’s fiercely-guarded heart. He could only lower his head, trying to prevent Sharon from seeing the tears rolling down his face.

“Elena is part of the reason I’m offering you a chance like this, but another part is me giving myself some hope, to try and achieve a dream I never thought possible. Some time earlier, I was in a hopeless despair, but your appearance has given me a glimmer of hope. So you don’t have to think about what you can give in return, giving your all is enough.”

That eliminated all of Richard’s hesitation, “I accept! As long as I live, I’ll dedicate my life—”

Sharon cut him off, covering his mouth as she laughed, “That’s unnecessary. The first two words were all I wanted to hear.

“Alright, Little Richard, it’s time for you to see a real magic rune.”

Sharon took a few step backs, light as water without any gestures

or spells. It was like she lost all mass as she ascended into the sky, only stopping once she reached a metre of height. She spread her arms gracefully like a swan, and her magic robes as well as all her clothes turned into a million rays of light dancing around her.

Richard was shocked beyond words. Never in his life had he thought he would see such a dreamlike body without anything covering it, and his master's body was more breathtaking than he'd thought.

By the time he recovered from his shock, blue lines were running all along Sharon's body, like branches with a life of their own as they spread throughout her body before shining suddenly with a faint blue light.

Richard's mind blanked out, filled only with this beautiful blue as his train of thought ground to a halt. He couldn't think anymore; this beauty before him was beyond words— no, beyond everything.

Sharon's voice came lightly, like it was something that was not of this world. "Did you see that? This is a rune unique to me, the Deepblue Aria. It isn't complete yet, and I thought I wouldn't be able to complete it in my lifetime, but now I'm willing to give myself some hope. Richard. If it's possible in the future, complete it for me."

# Book 1, Chapter 32 - A Radiant Trauma

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Richard approached her subconsciously, each step feeling like he was in dreamland as the light seemed about to brush against his face. He raised his arm to touch the dancing blues, but his fingers just passed through the magnificent colour and left him touching Sharon's body straight-on. The point of contact seemed to explode with the might of a legendary spell, causing both Richard and Sharon to tremble involuntarily.

So in awe of the beauty and mystery of the Deepblue Aria was he that he could not even express himself right now with words or senses. He found that roiling blood gushing into his body once more, the most powerful it had ever been, and this time it could not be stopped. It engulfed his frozen consciousness once again. His hand couldn't help but explore further, instinctively wandering up along the legendary mage's glistening thighs.

At that moment, Richard suddenly felt like he'd awakened a volcano. A rumble sounded as Sharon seemingly ignited like a torch, blue flames spurting out to form a depthless azure around her. She gritted her teeth and lifted Richard up in one go, boundless mana surging into his body. Richard himself began to emit an elemental storm that tore his clothes apart before turning them to dust!

With a bang, Richard was thrown to the ground. The surface was extremely hard, and the impact was strong, but with all the mana Sharon had poured into him racing through every cell he felt no pain at all. However, the strong impact still numbed his limbs, leaving him unable to get up right away.

The legendary mage's mana had not been able to suppress Richard's berserking bloodline, and even as he lay down the mark of a mature male pointed sideways, aimed at her. "Damn it!" Sharon gritted out, moving ten metres in an instant to appear above him before she shot straight down. She pulled a blue band of

the light around her, forming gigantic wings that covered most of the room. These wings were radiant, unwilling to dissipate so easily.

Richard's body rose instinctively, welcoming this dazzling and ambiguous temptation as a bestial roar was shot out of his throat. He suddenly felt a certain part of his body enter a mysterious region, dark wet and powerful, and each powerful thrust seemed to bombard his nerves with a crushing sensation. He couldn't help but howl, retaliating by sheer instinct as he placed his hands on her thighs and, grabbing tightly, doing all he could to head deeper and deeper in. Sharon's tightly furrowed brows first began to relax, before they finally rose.

On that fated night, as the Deepblue dreamt, a boy became a man. Seven moons hung high in the sky, dying the night seven different colours as many people's fates were altered.

Even the most special of days pass, however, and the Day of Destiny was no different. Morning light shone on Richard's body to slowly wake him up; a new day had come. He found Sharon still there, lying in a deep sleep. Her body seemed flawless under the morning sun, shining with an ivory lustre. The two reddish bumps at her chest seemed to sense Richard's gaze, beginning to tremble slightly. The azure patterns from the night before had already disappeared from her body, and everything seemed to be but a dream.

Everything was perfect, but their bodies were positioned oddly. Richard's body was curled up, and his head rested in the curve of Sharon's arm. His arms and legs were over hers, as if he was afraid she would escape, or as if he lacked a sense of security and independence. The legendary mage, in contrast, was lying down casually with her right arm around him as she slept in satisfaction.

Mornings were normally the time when men had the most energy, and as he began to recall the events of the previous night, Richard couldn't control himself at the sight of the sleeping

Sharon. His hands began to move, but the tiny movements immediately awakened the legendary mage. Sharon stretched out lazily, and then crisply slapped away the hand that was wiggling all over her body. She then unwillingly opened her eyes, feeling extremely uncomfortable as something hot and hard moved as it pressed into the side of her buttocks. She grabbed it by instinct and gave it a wring, causing Richard to let out a groan.

The legendary mage turned and opened her eyes, her gaze gradually brightening to let Richard know she was truly awake. She didn't seem the least bit surprised to find him lying next to her, first covering her mouth to yawn a couple of times before she stretched for a while.

Richard could only continue moaning. Even as Sharon moved, his right hand was still on his member. On top of that the scene before him made his nose want to bleed, and he almost climaxed at that moment.

The legendary mage sat up and looked at Richard, actually asking, "Want more?"

Richard flushed, but nodded. He was at his most energetic age right now, and even if the blessing of wisdom meant one year of development was equal to three for others, he was still only as mature as a seventeen-or eighteen-year-old. Having just become a man, and especially with a woman like Sharon who was second to none, it was obvious he would want more.

"How many times do you want it?" the legendary mage began to laugh in a strange manner, the gentle woman from the night before seeming to be an illusion.

Richard actually began to think this through earnestly. He still had no idea of the limits of his body, but there was something he was sure of. No matter how much it was, it would not be enough. He felt full of energy, like he could persist even if he had to get it up twice. His blood stirred, fully supportive of his fantasies and

unworried of being sucked dry.

“Three times,” Richard hesitated, “No... Five...”

Sharon suddenly burst into laughter, her right hand moving a few times and practically killing Richard who was already at the edge. She then stood up, waved her hand to summon new underwear and robes before she began to dress. “It’s day, so you don’t get any!”

A major disappointment... Richard silently stood up. He saw a full set of male clothing in the corner of the bedroom, and confirming with Precision that they were measured out for him, walked over to wear them.

Once clothed Richard felt like the awkwardness and apprehension had diminished. Sharon was no longer the woman who made him go completely crazy last night, instead that legendary mage that he knew before. She looked completely normal, as if nothing had happened at all, leaving him unable to adjust to the situation. Two very different Sharons matched up, leaving him unable to tell if the last night or this morning were dreams.

Sharon looked at Richard and then walked to the French window, gazing at the majestic view of the sun rising from behind the distant Everwinter Mountains, “Is there anything you want to say?”

Richard organised his feelings and forced himself to calm down, “Why? Also, what do you need me to do in the future?”

“Why?” The legendary mage laughed melodiously, and then said with a shrug, “What’s there to ask? It’s simple. I’ve been in a bad mood, so I took advantage of you. That’s all there is! Hm, if you really want a reason, then it should be enough that you’re tender and delicious!”

Seeing Richard turning slightly pale, Sharon could not resist the



urge to laugh harder. It took her a while to continue, “To be honest, there is a reason. My favourite hobby is to leave some trauma in every powerful being that could change the history of Norland in the future. But everyone’s different, so I have to give them different psychological blows. I was thinking about you, and eventually decided that what I did last night was the best. I’d take your virginity! So from hereon, whenever you find another woman, you won’t be able to help but remember me! Haha!”

The legendary mage’s expression and tone made her words seem true, and Richard was speechless. He had to repeat his second question once she was done, “What do you need me to do, in the future?”

“The future...” Sharon suddenly went quiet. She sighed, stretching her left arm and pulling up the sleeve to reveal a tender forearm. Threads of blue mana began to appear on the snow-like skin, “The Deepblue Aria is a grade 6 rune, and Norland right now has knowledge only upto grade 5. If you wish to complete it, you’ll need to head to the depths of the boundless planes and look for its secrets.”

“I will explore the planes,” Richard said peacefully, not vowing or being hot-blooded.

“Then I’ll be waiting for you!” The dark blue rune slowly disappeared, and Sharon lifted her bright face, regaining her willful temperament. However, Richard now knew that the unrestrained, fearless legendary mage that everyone saw was not the true Sharon. The one wreathed in blue flames last midnight was truly her, or perhaps she was like him; one personality hidden so deeply nobody could find it.

The skies brightened as the Day of Destiny came to a close. A lonely Richard left Sharon’s residence, and as the magic gates behind him closed he couldn’t help but halt his footsteps to turn back and take a look. Their worlds were separated once more. Who knew when he would be able to open these magic doors again?

Sharon's last words were still ringing in his ears, "You definitely can't let anyone know about last night!"

Of course he wouldn't do such a thing. This event, this experience... it was hidden deep inside his heart, stored carefully as the most valuable of treasures. It was the mage's other declaration that brought a slight smile to his frozen face. Sharon had succeeded in leaving behind a mark in his heart after taking his first time. She'd branded her own trauma into him, one that would be difficult to eliminate.

Quite a radiant trauma, indeed.

# Book 1, Chapter 33 - The Second Blow

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Richard's life resumed as per usual after the Day of Destiny. He'd been at his limit already, so all he could do now was continue to persist with the day to day. He would surprise the grand mages again and again with each day, so much so that even knowing how mysterious the world truly was they were surprised by how such a young body could be the most precise of machines. He worked with no emotions, no fluctuations, pushing on and on without tiring.

The constant diligence brought forth an astounding amount of energy. The youth seemed to be improving so fast it astonished everyone. The only part of his growth that didn't seem to be taking a shortcut was his mana, which continued to creep up at a normal rate.

Time should've flown by like water, but some little incidents disturbed the peace. Richard was determined to hide the events on the Day of Destiny deep in his heart, but it took less than a week for the legendary mage herself to blab about it, proudly emphasising her evaluation of him being 'tender and delicious.'

Just like any other information this spread quickly through the Deepblue. Most men, and half as many women, remembered the name of Richard Archeron, feeling varying amounts of hatred and wishing they could've been the one in his place. While they couldn't actually beat Richard up, many loved doing that a few times a day in their minds. It gave them pleasure, sometimes a lot of pleasure.

No matter how unthinkable this might seem, nobody had the courage to doubt Sharon. Not one person. The boss was the boss, and the person giving out gold was always right. This was the truth in the Deepblue. With the cost of living here, anyone without Sharon's Delight would have difficulty even surviving, and most people without the right to even obtain that bill every month had

no right to say anything. It was the most effective of lines that separated the residents into the core of the Deepblue and the ‘others.’

Those who knew the Deepblue well knew that this was not Sharon’s intention. The legendary mage did as she liked, and wasn’t proficient in managing societies. It was just that this structure had been formed naturally, and people got used to the hierarchy. Without it many would be at a loss, and the silent mages who formed the foundation of the Deepblue actually liked this lifestyle.

The hierarchy of the Deepblue was just like a feudal society. The residents paid taxes while the feudal lord took over responsibility for their protection. With war everywhere on the continent, being able to live under the wing of a legendary mage was blissful.

The seventeen grand mages gathered by the legendary mage’s side could give her suggestions. However, unlike what many people thought, they were actually happy to see this. For them, the legendary mage’s happiness in body and mind was the most important of all, and the only one who felt conflicted by the events was Blackgold.

The grey dwarf’s first response to Sharon’s proclamation was elation: he felt like Her Excellency had been truly wise to use this method to show her ‘delight.’ It had to be said that Richard was getting more and more Delight lately, and it was growing heavy on his mind. Although it was nothing for the legendary mage’s personal wallet, it was a huge amount for the Deepblue. There did not seem to be a need to be too picky about this.

The grey dwarf had believed resolutely that since Sharon was delighted both in mind and body, there was no need to express her delight in terms of gold. Richard’s stipend should have dropped greatly. But that lucky Richard...

The grey dwarf truly had to call Richard lucky. With the natural

judgement of his race he saw the boy's body strengthening by the day, mana flowing faintly as his bloodline began to reveal its true power. No matter how he looked at it, he couldn't see how Richard was 'tender and delicious.'

Blackgold was a special dwarf; he'd left behind the stubborn persistence that flowed in the blood of his species. Thus, since Richard had received such a special honour, he believed he wouldn't need to hold back when he bought the cheaper runes Richard made in the future. The boy's gift at runecrafting was increasingly shocking. He'd learnt the craft himself from his other studies, and his knowledge could even be considered expansive at this point. Once he began studying runes officially, the stability and precision of the complex spell formations he created was difficult for anyone to comprehend. They could only say this was enlightenment from the gods.

All great beings, or those dedicated to helping them, possessed amazing foresight. While the grand mages were fixated on Richard's prospects, Blackgold was focused on the numerous runes he would create in the process.

Because of the Day of Destiny the grey dwarf dropped his pricing target for the runes by 40%. The profits at this price weren't too large, but compared to the general price on the continent it was 70% cheaper. This was a way for him to try and console himself, even as he found himself being very generous. No matter what the price he bought at was, wouldn't it all go to Her Excellency in the end anyway?

He was in an excellent mood the next few days. The Day of Destiny would reduce his expenses on one hand, and now he had a stream of revenue in the future. There could be nothing greater than that. However, those days came to a sudden halt when Sharon decided Richard's monthly allowance: the boy's stipend did not drop at all! The grey dwarf had been left dazed for a long time. The increased revenue in the future still consoled him, but his

price was dropped another 10%.

The news rippled out in all directions, like the splash of a pebble falling in a lake. Anyone sensitive to information could judge just how far they were from the core based on how long it took them to receive this news.

Steven was one such sensitive person. He didn't receive the news too early or too late, but it was definitely later than he had expected. However, he didn't have the energy to feel angry over his position in the Deepblue; the news itself was so shocking he could never imagine it.

After obtaining the news, Steven appeared to be calm. At the very least, there were no other sounds in his residence. He stood in front of the magic mirror naked, and stared at himself for a whole two hours. Minnie stood by the French window behind him, unmoving as though she was a lifeless statue.

It was still snowing outside, and it felt like the weather had never improved from the day they'd returned from the testing area. While Floe Bay's springs often had snow, it had never been so heavy and lasted for so long as it had this year.

The residence had always been completely isolated from the callous world outside. Even if one opened the window the magic barrier would be able to block the chill and haze, but now the stifling grey from the outside seemed to pass through the window and extend into the residence. The air seemed stiff, the dark grey mist so heavy it left one feeling suffocated. Minnie subconsciously hugged herself tighter, feeling like her frail body under these magic robes could not take on the ravaging of the storm.

Floe Bay was magnificent, but it was not friendly. Before the blizzard revealed its wrath, there was normally an exceeding calm just like now. The residence was deathly still.

Steven's residence was very, very large. The space was beautiful, and was a representation of his status and power. In the past she

had been intoxicated by this beauty, but now it felt like this place was far too big. It left her uneasy as the two of them stood in this huge space, feeling both the unknown chill as well as the terror of being about to get lost.

Minnie had the urge to escape, but she bit her lips hard and did not allow any movement or sound to escape her. She knew that the longer the silence was, the more terrifying the blizzard would be when it arrived. Steven had already stood there silently for two hours, and who knew how much longer this would last? With only the two of them in this large residence, she would be the person he'd vent on. She'd be the target when the blizzard hit.

Steven finally started moving. He showed off each muscle of his body in front of the mirror, his dragon blood and powerful physique making him far sturdier than the normal mage. The young but mature man in the mirror was tall and strong, with no traces of excess flesh. The proportions of his limbs could be called perfect, and he could be proud of this body that was a personification of male beauty. The dragon bloodline seemed like a dark red mist in the magic mirror, circulating around the surface of his body to give him even greater charm.

Judging himself objectively, Steven could naturally come up with a few evaluations. Most were praises he'd received two years ago, when he'd just turned fifteen and truly stepped into the world of nobles. He could definitely be proud of his body and appearance; unlike that damned Richard who still exuded a juvenile aura due to his age, he had true masculine charm.

There was no lack of words like handsome, determined, sturdy, and powerful in the evaluations Steven had of himself, but there were some things missing.

He turned his head and then asked with an eerie voice, "What does 'tender and delicious' mean?"

Minnie's body trembled without permission; the blizzard had

arrived. She lowered her head without saying a word; anything she said at this moment would be like dripping fresh blood in front of a ravenous wolf. It would only make him more brutal.

Bang! The skin on Steven's right hand was sliced open as he punched the magic mirror, blood spurting out from a dozen spots before dripping to the ground. He didn't seem to sense the pain, however, instead turning and staring at Minnie with bloodshot eyes as he yelled with all the strength in his body, "I'm asking you, WHAT DOES TENDER AND DELICIOUS MEAN?!"



# Book 1, Chapter 34 - The Sediments of Memories

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Minnie was like a lifeless cloth doll, bouncing back from the impact as she fell to the ground forehead first. She lay there unmoving, a stream of blood gushing from her long hair that seemed to wriggle and squirm on the shiny obsidian floor like a strange being.

It took her a moment to move, her hands groping around her before she pushed herself up with difficulty. Blood continued to flow from the sides of her hair, dyeing one side of her cheeks red and sticking her hair to her face. It wasn't just the forehead; the corners of her lips and nostrils were also spurting blood, and Minnie touched her face to feel the warmth. Seeing her hand covered in red she rubbed it hard on her clothes, before she tore off a corner of her skirt to clean up her face. She then bunched up her hair and tied it using that very bloodstained cloth, swaying as she stood up.

Steven remained where he was, his chest heaving as the wisps of blood in his eyes did not seem to dim at all. His muscles twitched under his skin, and his tightly-clenched fists occasionally caused crisp, cracking sounds. Dragon warlocks had powerful physiques, and while not comparable to true warriors they were far stronger than normal mages. An attack made in the midst of absolute fury would be powerful.

Minnie swayed as she walked towards Steven, closing her eyes to await the next painful blow. Her long white dress had large bloodstains on it, and half her face had swelled up. Still her expression remained peaceful, and she still didn't make a sound; crying or begging would only net her a more powerful beating.

The corner of Steven's eye twitched. He suddenly grabbed the collar of her dress and gave a powerful tug, splitting its upper half

into two. He then pulled away her undergarments, revealing her naked upper body.

However, what he saw was not a naked body that could excite him. On the original pale skin that exquisitely radiated her youth were bruises of all sizes. It made for a shocking sight, like a carved jade vase that had been smashed until there were cracks everywhere.

The youth took a deep breath and closed his eyes. It took a few minutes of silence for him to calm down completely, but other than the wisps of blood in his eyes that wouldn't disappear so soon everything went back to normal. He told Minnie, "Don't go to class for a few days, and rest and recover here. I'll have a cleric come and take care of the injuries to your face."

He paused and began to pace around in the room. After doing dozens of rounds, he suddenly stopped. He waved his fist around, as if that would help make up his mind, "It's time to resolve everything. The situation really can't be saved at this rate. Once you've dealt with the injuries to your face go look for Erin, you know what to do. It's about time that girl was of some use!"

Minnie nodded silently, and after seeing him wave his fist and indicating he had nothing left to say she dragged her heavy body along, doing her best to maintain her stability. She entered the bathroom and began to wash the blood off, while Steven dressed himself neatly and twisted a large ruby ring on his finger. The ruby emitted a dazzling ray of light and immediately dimmed, magic taking its message through layers of obstruction to be transmitted to every corner of the Deepblue.

It took but a moment for two capable men to arrive before Steven. One was a warrior, while the other was a cleric. The two listened carefully to Steven's instructions, and the warrior left immediately while the cleric stayed to treat Minnie.

The cleric crossed his arms in front of his chest in prayer,

beginning a chant that caused a pure white light to pour out of his hands and splash on Minnie's head like water. The light flowed along her skin, causing wounds to close at a speed the naked eye could see everywhere it went. The bruises dissipated and the swelling went down slightly.

Although Minnie's injuries looked frightening they were only superficial. There was no need for a greater heal to be cast on her, but since Steven was extremely impatient for her to recover the cleric didn't mind putting in the effort to cast three such heals on her.

Once the treatment was done, Minnie was left with slight traces of injuries at the corner of her forehead. Knowing what she had to do, she did not linger or rest, instead wearing her robes and leaving the residence immediately. The fatigued cleric left silently as well, leaving Steven alone in the residence. He seemed to pace back and forth in worry, taking a few looks outside the window on occasion and cursing the wretched weather.

Finally, the warrior hastened back to stand behind Steven, whispering, "Everything's been prepared. How should we do it?"

Steven gritted his teeth, raised his arm and slashed down towards the front. He answered in a deep voice, "Do what you can!"

The warrior trembled, and a ruthless look appeared on his face before he left quietly.

Many fates had been changed on the Day of Destiny, but Richard continued to work hard for the sake of the future. His progress towards the peak was just like how he climbed the rocky slopes in his youth, having to be done step by step. Every early morning, every late night, it was all a tiny step towards his goals.

Deep in the night, Richard walked towards his residence, filled with satisfaction and tiredness from a day's work. However, just as the heavy metal gate to his residence was in sight, he suddenly

heard crying and sounds of abuse in the depths of the alley nearby. The voice sounded slightly familiar, and Precision immediately told him that it was Erin's.

Erin... It was a name that had practically disappeared from his life, but now it had come up once more. It sounded like she was in trouble, something Richard found rather strange— who would dare cause trouble here? Then again, the surrounding area was extremely quiet and the magic lamps used to illuminate the public regions were soft and dim. On the other hand every residence here other than Richard's own had grand mages staying within, or children of nobles or even the emperor. The security was tight, and there were magic eyes everywhere without any areas being neglected. If anyone wanted to kick up a fuss, they would find numerous enforcers surrounding them out of nowhere.

The sounds of crying came from an alley at the side that was rather deep, and came from a bend, which meant Richard could not see what was going on. He frowned and immediately walked quickly towards the alley, turning the corner to see the source of the ruckus. It was indeed Erin, being accosted by three men with obvious malicious intent.

Right behind the girl was an extremely tall and sturdy man, his body so big it was equivalent to three young ladies stacked up. His bulky hand was gripping the girl's wrists, practically lifting her off the ground. Another tall man, this one skinny, was standing at the side with his arms crossed, his gaze wandering up and down Erin's body while lingering at her chest and abdomen. At the front of her was a fierce fellow who was groping her— it seemed like he was searching her body for something, but his hands didn't leave the sensitive regions at all.

Erin could only kick around in her attempt to struggle free, but the man grabbed her thigh and clasped it under his armpit. His hands began to wander up her legs as he chuckled, "I almost forgot. There's a place here that can hide a lot of money. Come,

let's see how much gold you've got hidden there that has you so nervous!"

"Let me go! I'll return the money! It's not time yet!" Erin shrieked, but the sturdy man behind her used his left hand and cupped her mouth, stopping the girl's screams.

The man in front of her seemed to have no intentions of stopping and wanted to continue searching all the way. His smile was even more lewd now, "It's not time, but it's just a few more days. We want to retrieve our interest in advance now. If you really have no money, then sleep with us for a few nights to repay your debt! It's not as if you've never earned money from a man's body before..."

The three men's attention was entirely on Erin, until they suddenly felt a boiling-hot heatwave surge over, blocking the area around them well. Next came Richard's voice, "Let go of her!"

The man in front of Erin halted his movements but did not let go. He stared at the emblem on Richard's collar hesitantly, finding it difficult to ascertain Richard's identity. However, the fireball leaping up and down at Richard's right hand was scaring them witless. A mage, and one so young at that appearing in such a luxurious region was, at the very least, an enforcer. For people like them who lived at the borders, enforcers were basically gods who could not be crossed.

Richard furrowed his brows. These three men were obviously not residents in the area, and did not even seem to be official residents of Deepblue's towers. Otherwise, they definitely would have understood the significance of his emblem.

The men saw Richard's expression and immediately retrieved their hands, and summoned the courage to ask, "May I know who..."

"Richard. Richard Archeron."

The three men were obviously startled, and they immediately

became deferential. All who lived by the borders knew the names of the legendary mage's pupils and the grand mages. This was the minimum requirement for survival. In this region, they did not even dare have thoughts of doing evil. Everyone knew that there were magic eyes everywhere monitoring the area. This was a public warning to prevent the impetuous and ignorant people from harming the residents in the luxurious areas. This was because these residences included not just powerful mages, but children of aristocracy who were not all that powerful as well.

The three men immediately let Erin go, and the girl darted behind Richard like a frightened rabbit, trembling hands grabbing onto his robes.

The leader glared at Erin, and then smiled as if fawning on Richard, "Lord Richard, this woman owes us a lot of money, and because she can't repay us she's hidden inside the Deepblue and is unwilling to come out. We've only come to the Deepblue because we have no other choice. Look, we've come all the way and found her, but she still won't return us the money."

"But there's three more days!" Erin shouted from behind Richard.

# Book 1, Chapter 35 - Assassination

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The man glared at Erin immediately, saying in a self-righteous manner, “But this isn’t the first time you’ve stalled. The Deepblue’s laws allow me to ask you to return the money immediately. If you don’t want to, you can come with me and work to pay off your debt, or scram!”

The man then turned towards Richard, his expression shifting to a smile so fast it was like magic, “Lord Richard. We probably shouldn’t have appeared here, but we’re acting according to the laws of the Deepblue, which we wouldn’t dare to ignore. Her Excellency once said contracts must not be blasphemed, and this woman hasn’t returned the debt or even paid interest. She doesn’t even provide services as per the law! Don’t be taken in by her pitiful appearance!”

Although he seemed extremely respectful, the man’s words revealed his unyielding nature. Although the Deepblue did not have many laws, those that were in place were as strong as steel. Even grand mages didn’t have the right to break them, forget someone like Richard.

Richard furrowed his brows and turned to look at Erin, seeing the terror and recoil in her eyes. She didn’t even dare to meet his gaze. He balled his hand up, and the fireball floated several metres into the sky before dissipating into a small explosion.

Such exquisite control over magic immediately caused the three men to have a change in expression, and they couldn’t help but take several steps backwards. While what they were doing was reasonable, given the difference in their positions if Richard injured or disabled them in a bad mood the most they would get was gold in compensation.

Richard’s eyes swept over them, “I’ll repay her debts on her behalf. Now scram!”

“But...” The man in charge was obviously unwilling, secretly peeping at Erin who was hiding behind Richard.

Richard snickered, “What, you doubt my words?”

The three immediately went pale and answered no. However the leader suddenly glared at Erin and said fiercely, “Just you wait, little thing. Don’t you go home alone!”

Richard turned grim, and the three immediately hastened their footsteps. When their figures disappeared into the distance he turned and looked at the girl, who was hugging herself quietly. He sighed, “How much do you owe them?”

“One— One thousand and two hundred gold coins.” Erin’s voice was soft, with some obvious tremors in it. Her shoulders shook slightly, making it obvious that she was crying with her head down.

Richard wanted to speak, but eventually he stopped himself with just a sigh. He clearly remembered the time when Erin had been unwilling to ‘earn’ his money, but in less than a year that had changed. If she hadn’t been at the end of her rope this girl wouldn’t have told him about the magnitude of her debt, and the very act of doing so meant that she’d left her purity, her ego, and her pride all behind her in one year. The girl who’d poked her head through the bathroom door with a sunny disposition was no longer there.

Richard’s heart squeezed involuntarily. Part of it may have been because of that ‘It’s not as if you’ve never earned money from a man’s body before,’ but mostly it was because the amount that left her at her wit’s end was a mere 1200 coins.

Even a year ago that was worth a mere two mana potions after he’d tested his magic. Now he didn’t even drink normal mana potions because they were weak and slow, and he basically ignored the last four digits of his monthly bills because, be they four zeroes or four nines, it was all the same.



Richard was quiet, and it was difficult to see any fluctuations in his expression. He only asked calmly, “I’ll return this sum for you. Are there more?”

Erin hesitated, and then whispered, “I still owe a few other people four hundred gold coins, but I’ll do something about that on my own...”

Richard interrupted her, “A total of 1600 gold coins, right? No problem.”

Erin finally raised her head, but before that she hastily used the back of her hand to wipe at her face. She looked at Richard and smiled helplessly, combing her hair with a newfound calmness. “But I have no way to earn that much money, at least within half a year. I have nothing at all, except myself. If you want me, you can look for me anytime.”

Richard seemed not to hear anything she was saying. He took out a memo and wrote a receipt, signing his name on it before he shoved it into Erin’s hands. Without even saying goodbye he strode towards his residence.

However, he suddenly turned back after a few steps. The girl had yet to leave, and her two hands were hugged tightly around her as she crouched where she was. He sighed inside once more and walked to her. Erin lifted her head, gazed up at Richard, and whispered, “I-I’m very afraid. I’m sorry...”

“Because of those men?”

Erin nodded silently.

Richard stretched his hand out to the girl, “Let’s go. I’ll send you back. I want to know who has the guts to stop you.”

Richard’s words had a faint trace of killing intent. Now that he had already promised to return her debts, he did not mind giving them a lesson to remember if those people dared cause trouble, or perhaps even sending them down to hell himself.

The residents of the main tower of the Deepblue were completely different from those at the borders, with a huge disparity in power. Even if he killed someone all he needed to give was monetary compensation, and if the other party provoked or humiliated him first he had no need to do even that.

Erin grabbed Richard's hand and stood up with his help. She then retracted her hand and stayed a half-step behind Richard as they walked. The road from the main tower to the borders was a long and quiet route, and there were few people here in the dark. There were some who walked about hastily, but nobody spared the two another glance. A bustling day had depleted everyone of their stamina, and all they wanted to do was to return home and have a warm night of good sleep. There was more work waiting for them tomorrow.

Both Richard and Erin remained silent along the way, not saying a single word. They had no idea what to speak about despite a year having passed.

Erin's home was in a little alley at the outer regions of the borders. It was a confined room that didn't reveal the scenery outside the Deepblue, the windows inside more like decoration as they opened inwards to the wall of a patio. The magic lamps burning within were the only source of light.

Similar homes could be found everywhere in the borders, and those with windows showing the outside cost thrice of four times as much as those without. Although a few scattered towns surrounded the Deepblue, most would rather stay at the borders even if these houses were dark. There was still more dignity in living at the Deepblue than in those towns.

After sending Erin to the door and memorising the location, Richard turned to leave, intentionally not meeting Erin's eyes of anticipation. The dark night here was extremely quiet because of the cold weather, the poor fuel for the lights extremely unstable as they flickered and swayed. They formed large shadows that were

like monsters from another plane, crawling everywhere, about to leap out and hunt their prey at any time.

For some reason, Richard suddenly felt slightly cold. This was already near the outermost part of the borders and it was -10° C, but Richard's robes were naturally better than normal. No, this was not a natural cold, instead a dark wet chill that met his body like a glacier that had not melted in ten thousand years. Even the air had frozen, making it feel like he'd fallen into a room of reptiles with something slithering past his back on occasion. Richard soon felt a thin layer of sweat break out, and his clothing soaked completely and stuck to his body, making him feel extremely uncomfortable. He breathed out and loosened the button at the collar of his mage robes.

However, he burnt himself when his finger accidentally touched the emblem at his corner! At some point the emblem had begun to emit a hazy lustre, and had become boiling hot. This was a unique item possessed by all of Sharon's apprentices, both a show of status as well as a tool to detect malicious intent. For it to become so hot meant that an enemy was nearby, and they were not hiding their killing intent!

Richard suddenly froze. The shadows behind him arched as a humanoid figure rose from within, It tore out like the shade was a cocoon before it pounced forward like a cheetah, thrusting a dark grey dagger with no sheen towards Richard's lower back.

The attack was merciless, and had been performed at such close quarters. Even the most well-trained of warriors would find it difficult to evade a surprise attack such as this, much less an acolyte who had yet to reach adulthood. Hitmen and archer-types had always been nemeses of mages, with one being at close quarters and the other from a distance.

Despite all that, however, the dagger was deviated the moment it came in contact with the robes. It remained unable to penetrate the fabric, but the hitman wasn't rattled in the least as he quickly

focused the power on one point and thrust with more strength. The magic robe immediately lit up in a dim yellow, beginning to expand as they activated a translucent shield.

The hitman immediately felt as if his arm and weapon were in dense mud, and it was difficult to brandish his weapon. However, this was not the first time that he was assassinating a mage, and was experienced against magic shields. He continued to focus the tip of the blade on the same point, using all his strength to push the dagger further in. A loud noise rang out as a huge hole was created in the robes.

However, behind the robes was nothing. The hitman had to toss them away with a wave of his hands, and he saw that Richard had already used the opportunity to dart towards a dark alley several metres away.

The hitman immediately grew delighted, a companion of his would be in that alley, but even if Richard was seeking his own death the payment differed based on who killed him. The man immediately sped up, his body practically parallel to the ground as he began to close in on the youth at twice the speed.

Perhaps he had been too hasty in escaping, but Richard suddenly stumbled and actually tripped. In a hurry he reached out and grabbed a metal bar at the side of the alley, probably trying to use that to steady himself.

The hitman who was only a small distance away from Richard was immediately delighted. Richard now was a live target for him, and he could definitely kill him before he escaped into the alley. The moment Richard entered the place, it would be difficult to steal him from his companion. As fast as he could, the hitman thrust his dagger towards Richard's ribs.

However, the youth suddenly revealed a completely different strength with the metal bar in his grasp. Using the bar as a pivot he drew a half-circle with his body in the air, smacking into the wall

to dodge the fatal blow just in time. The hitman's efforts were rendered fruitless, and because of the strength he'd put in he couldn't control his direction anymore. The assassin only brushed past Richard with his momentum, basically revealing all the vulnerable points of his body to his target. Thankfully this was a mage, if he was also a hitman...

Even as the hitman was thanking his luck he suddenly saw the target's right hand twist. The fixed 3 foot bar broke off from the outer walls, and the youth used the bar as a dagger to thrust into the man's ribs. Richard twisted the bar inside, digging through the ribs to break his spine and tear the nerves it was attached to. This left a gaping hole in the assassin's abdomen, the few unremarkable little movements leaving behind fatal injuries that even a high-levelled cleric could do little about. Richard's methods were clearly amongst the most exquisite in the underworld.

# Book 1, Chapter 36A - Participation

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A couple of dull thuds sounded as two daggers thrust into the hitman's body simultaneously. One pierced into his heart through the gaps between his ribs, and the other bore a hole through his backbone with enough ruthless precision to take his life in one go. Sadly, these attacks of his companion's had found the wrong companion, a fatal mistake.

Richard dodged away like an apparition, his red hands swiping at the assassin. The mage's hand seemed to possess a certain sharp energy that took the assassin's head off, blood gushing out of his neck.

Richard stretched to grab the head that had been sent flying, bending over and pushing it on the ground like a ball. The face was still a mixture of shock and fear as the head rolled into the depths of the alley, stopping in front of a dark shadow. Meanwhile, his open eyes stared emptily at the shadows.

The person in the shadows seemed to feel uneasy upon seeing this, finally moving slightly and opening two tiny slits. Wild, bestial eyes met those of the assassin, a slight change that was practically impossible to notice. However, the numbers jumping in Richard's vision told him that the shadow didn't match its surroundings at all, and he was able to notice right away.

A blazing fireball flew into the alley with a whoosh, exploding in the half-sealed space. Its might was amplified manifold by the walls, giving it nearly 50 degrees of damage that was basically fatal to any being below level 10. A pitiful cry rang out amidst the surging flames, and a figure on fire danced within.

A heat wave rushed out, still unbearable despite the impact being ten or so metres away. Richard chose not to evade it, instead entering the alley as it struck. He stood by the wall at the entrance and retracted his aura, raising his right arm slightly and aiming his

palm at the entrance.

The surging wave of heat finally stopped, and the magic flames were faintly discernible now. However, the half-charred body in the depths of the alley still continued to twitch, releasing pitiful moans that signified he was about to reach his end. At this moment, a slim male appeared at the mouth of the alley, and peeked to take a look inside. This new entrant wielded a heavy single-handed axe emitting a dull, chilly luster that did not match with his physique.

The first thing he saw was Richard's palm spitting out fire! The flames were aimed directly at the man's face, causing him to cry out in pain as he felt his face burn and everything go black. He quickly drew back; although Hand of Flames was a grade 1 spell with only two degrees of damage often used to light the way in expeditions, it could display an immense power itself when used appropriately.

The man took several steps back and suddenly felt a chill at the side of his abdomen. He then roared, the heavy axe chopping down lightning quick to practically flit across Richard's scalp.

Richard, who wanted to take advantage of this time to make a sneak attack, immediately broke out in cold sweat. Who knew the man could still counter him with such speed and precision despite losing his axe? The surging energy from the axe told him this was a warrior of at least level 10!

Richard immediately dropped down with a strange motion, beginning to crawl around like a lizard until he was ten metres away. The decision proved correct, because the man continued with a barrage of attacks at his earlier position. The axe had already brushed over his head thrice in succession, getting closer and closer every time. The most dangerous one had even sliced the clothing on his back!

Richard stayed and pressed himself into the wall, remaining

unmoving. The pit of his stomach was hurting and he felt like he was burning up, the feeling of suffocation continuing to assail his senses. He felt like a fish on land, forced to open his mouth wide to breathe, but he controlled himself and endured the splitting pain in his stomach. He breathed far slower than normal, just in case the warrior who'd lost his sense of sight managed to find him.

The effects of Eruption had passed, and having burst forth with such strength several times greater than usual he would feel drowsy and fatigued for a while. Even if he drank a potent energy potion immediately it would still take him half an hour to return to normal. For that half hour, he basically wouldn't be able to move at all.

Richard's gaze was focused on the ground in front of the warrior's feet. He used the little light there was to observe his movements, a small technique from the the underworld that allowed one to avoid a direct gaze that would alarm the other party. He calculated the mana he had left in the meanwhile.

His body had grown very frail, and having cast two spells already he only had enough mana to cast a regular fireball. However, that would have limited effect on a warrior above level 10.

When the warrior found that his axe had cleaved through air a few times in succession, he was quite shocked. Never had he thought he would miss all of his blows; even if he was blinded his senses and techniques were still active. With his memory of the target's last position and the sneak attack, as well as a judgement of the opponent's speed, he could figure out where the youth would dodge and seal all of the escape routes off. He'd even touched him once, but he'd still failed? Unless Richard had crawled away like a lizard.

The man held his breath and turned slowly, preparing to find the darned kid. However, he suddenly felt something cold at the side of his abdomen as he moved. A near forty-centimetre-long wound appeared on his body, splitting up his insides to release intestines



and other organs into the open. The warrior swayed, a look of disbelief on his face as he released his grip on his weapon. The axe crashed down to the ground, while his own body felt like a sack of potatoes.

The flickering light of magic was beginning to light up in the distance, and it was starting to get clamorous. Hurried footsteps closes in, those of the mage enforcers that had already been alarmed. Even at the borders it was forbidden to cast ranged, dangerous spells in public, and the fireball was a classic example of such a spell. The arrival of the enforcers was obviously good for Richard, and he relaxed to let loose a breath of warm air.

Just as Richard relaxed, a series of hoarse and low chuckles sounded. This was followed by a charming voice that seemed to speak into his ear, “You can die peacefully now, Richard!”

However, the hitman herself was nowhere as close as her voice was. The moment she finished speaking, a dull dagger that did not emit any rays of light stretched out from three or four steps away, piercing towards Richard’s lower back. The dagger was a strange deathly-grey, with toxins smeared on the surface. Even if his vital areas were not struck, just having it swipe across his skin could take Richard’s life in half a minute. Just as the dagger was about to touch the middle of his back, the outline of the hitman’s body appeared like a translucent being.

However, the attack she prepared for did not work. A strange-looking dagger with a dark-red lustre wound around it appeared out of nowhere, blocking her own with skill that surpassed her’s.

This was no nameless dagger. On the contrary, the strange groove on its blade and signature blood-red luster was well-known in the world of darkness.

“The Blade of Calamity!” The female hitmen yelled. Her figure now was extremely clear, and even her face grew somewhat discernible. She just stared as the crimson dagger disappeared into

her body, instantly recalling the many legends in the past regarding the Blade of Calamity. The decade-old memories surged into her mind.

The most terrifying thing about the Blade of Calamity wasn't the sharpness of the dagger, instead how exquisite and outstanding the technique was. There was also the mysterious and unpredictable curses of calamity.

Everytime the dagger killed someone, it absorbed part of the other party's soul, using that power as fuel to activate the curses of calamity. There were a total of six, and while they could only be used once a day those who were struck by the curse wouldn't be able to tell when they'd be attacked; the longer the Blade of Calamity had his eye on someone, the more dangerous it was.

The dark red lustre being emitted from the dagger didn't feel like anything at all once it entered her body, but the assassin knew that the Blade of Calamity had unleashed the Blood Trace on her. This was his most well-known curse, allowing him to determine her position at any time for the next three days.

The assassin jumped high and performed a backflip, silently landing ten metres away. She crouched low on the ground like a shadow panther, a pair of lifeless eyes staring at the blood-red dagger.

A hand appeared at the hilt of the dagger, followed by an arm that seemed slender. Next was clothing so normal that it seemed unpresentable, followed by an average-looking face. However, the smile on it seemed philistine and vulgar. If not for that malicious and terrifying dagger, Naya could definitely be taken to be the boss of a little restaurant or tavern, using the little earnings he had to fill his stomach, so busy everyday that he could only fantasise about beautiful women to pass time. Whatever it was, it was difficult to connect him and the handsome man who had sparkled in the world of darkness a decade or so before.

Naya was completely opposite of the female hitman, who looked as if she had seen a great enemy. Instead, he made a show and began to flaunt his skills with his dagger, gazing vulgarly at the powerful curves of the assassin like a dirty old man, “So it’s you. What was your name again? Let me think, it’s Blood Parrot, or Ash Sparrow... It doesn’t matter what you’re called. In the blink of an eye, it’s been ten or so years since I last saw you. I didn’t expect your body to become this hot! But your level, tsk, how should I say this... How is it that there’s no change even after so many years? You’re still level 14? Have you been spending all these years accompanying old nobles to bed without the time to train?”

# Book 1, Chapter 36B - Participation

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Blood Parrot maintained her stance, ready to attack at any time. However, despite his casual posture and loud boasts that made him look like a vulgar street thug, there were actually no gaps in Naya's defence. There was no way for her to even attack, much less escape. She was a level 14 assassin and she was rendered almost completely unable to retaliate; how powerful did Naya have to be in his prime?

Naya had no intentions of attacking right away, instead continuing to mock Blood Parrot. He made ample use of his ability to make scathing remarks about his opponent, "Oh my, look at that posture. Why is your bottom sticking out so high? Are you trying to seduce me? While I have been earning quite a bit of extra income, how did you know I have money? Hehe, hehe..."

He laughed weirdly a few times, but his tone abruptly changed. He stopped the exaggerated vulgarity and boorishness, saying coldly, "Blood Parrot, how can people of your calibre dare come to the Deepblue and behave like this? Tell me who hired you, and I'll let you go. If you don't want to, I wouldn't mind practicing some techniques I haven't used in a long time. Oi Richard! You can stand up already, don't be so nervous. This is my territory, she won't touch a hair on your head."

Richard voiced a reply, but didn't get up the normal way. He first shifted to the corner of a wall, and pressed himself to it like a lizard before he stood up. The entire motion was nimble, and he'd moved in tricky directions. If someone tried to attack him while he was standing up, they would likely misjudge his position and fail.

Richard's movements left Naya extremely pleased. It was Blood Parrot who was astonished by the youth's actions, and only then did she understand the situation. An ugly, hoarse voice sounded out, "Blade of Calamity, you taught this boy all your assassination techniques? No wonder those people failed."

Naya shook his head in dissatisfaction and spat out, “You think this is everything? Pfft, it’s just the tip of the iceberg; it can’t even be considered the art of assassination. But this little guy learns fast and never forgets to keep his guard up, so he does have a bit of talent. However, my dearest Blood Parrot, are you trying to stall for time? Haven’t you noticed that I’m doing the same? This is my territory, and no matter how many reinforcements you call in, you won’t be able to escape my grasp...”

Just at this moment, an aggressive voice full of energy called out from the distance, “Her reinforcements have been taken care of, and so have yours! Also, there’s something I need to correct you about. The Deepblue is Her Excellency’s territory! Since you’re standing in her territory, you need to pay taxes!

Despite the huge ruckus, it was only now that the mage enforcers reached the scene. Blood Parrot’s body trembled, but she didn’t dare change stance in the slightest, lest Naya immediately deal her a fatal blow. A small yet imposing figure walked over from the end of the valley; Blackgold.

The grey dwarf’s imposing gait was only thanks to the huge crowd of mage enforcers around him, numbering more than a dozen. They were even guarded by about ten heavily armed foot-soldiers. These large men with steel on their bodies were all extremely mighty, using heavy weapons. They would have great power in these small alleys, something that gave Naya a headache. On top of that, there were more than ten mages behind them that were full of vigour!

The foot-soldiers were escorting three corpses and two men. The men were the ones Richard had seen in Naya’s tavern, but even seemingly taken hostage they appeared to be relaxed. Blackgold was just here for taxes, which was Naya’s business since they themselves had no income at all. Those three corpses, on the other hand, were reinforcements Blood Parrot had been waiting for. Unfortunately they weren’t all that smart, and had dared to

retaliate against the enforcers. They died without causing any damage to the grey dwarf's forces; in a frontal battle between assassins and regular soldiers equipped to the teeth, the assassins would face a heavy tragedy.

Truth be told, the grey dwarf's troop was strong enough to deal with even thirty of Naya's comrades, forget just three of Blood Parrot's companions. Naya himself would have to drop everything and escape alongside his group if faced with them. This was why the smile on his face turned into one currying favour with the dwarf, even if it seemed awkward and pained.

Blackgold's eyes flashed with a dangerous glint, "You only taught Richard the tip of the iceberg? You haven't taught him the essence of the art of assassination, but you still dare to take a thousand gold coins a day... You must know; when it comes down to it, this is Her Excellency's money you're taking. Her. Excellency's. Money!"

Naya smiled as if he was ridiculed and pulled the grey dwarf aside, speaking in a low voice, "Wasn't I boasting just now? Look, Richard can even take care of four assassins alone, so how can it just be the tip of the iceberg? That's the essence of everything I've experienced over the years! That's why it's understandable to take fees like that. Besides, I paid all my taxes last month. Your bringing so many people here is just..."

The grey dwarf too spoke in a hushed tone and glanced at Blood Parrot, "I heard there was a tiny issue here, which is why I brought more people here to take a look in case you couldn't take care of it and injured Her Excellency's little Richard. Who knew they're all at this level? How are you planning to take care of this woman?"

Naya furrowed his eyebrow, saying, "This is actually hard to say, and I'm not certain I'll get any answers. Would you like to stay and watch?"

"No no, I'm only in charge of collecting taxes. This has nothing

to do with me!” the grey dwarf rejected straight out with a wave of his arms, “And I don’t want to hear what she has to say. If you get any answers, take care of it yourself. Don’t you people of the underworld have your own laws?”

Naya frowned even more, “But this is the Deepblue, so everything works according to the laws of the Deepblue...”

The grey dwarf waved his arm and vulgarly interrupted Naya, “The law of the Deepblue is to pay your taxes honestly, that’s all. I’m off! Remember the taxes this month, I’ll pretend I didn’t see anything else here!”

The troop immediately tossed the corpses and men to the ground with a wave of Blackgold’s hand, escorting the dwarf back.

Naya turned grim. Blackgold’s tone had implied that the Deepblue had enough military power to destroy the underside of the city, an obvious warning and demonstration of power. He’d implied that, even without Her Excellency acting herself, those of the Deepblue could definitely take care of anyone without good intentions no matter how impressive they were ten years ago in the outside world. This was the Deepblue, Sharon’s Deepblue.

Blood Parrot remained with her buttocks raised high even as the grey dwarf left, as if she had some kind of fetish. The ground she was lying on had long grown damp with her sweat, but Naya’s killing intent that had remained locked on her from the start left her with no way out. Blackgold’s troop was even more terrifying than Naya himself, and she wouldn’t dare move at all.

When Naya’s gaze landed on her once more, Blood Parrot finally understood there would not be any lucky breaks. With a yell, she pounced towards Naya!

With a dull crash, Naya’s dagger wondrously appeared at the back of Blood Parrot’s head and knocked her unconscious. He kicked her a few times after she collapsed to the ground, confirming that she was unconscious before he turned to Richard,

“I need to interrogate her after this. The entire process will be exciting and bloody, and you can watch from the side and even give me some help; it will be extremely useful for your understanding of the dark arts. That isn’t necessary, however; it might be a little too early for you, giving you too much of a shock. Decide for yourself whether you’re going to participate. What do you think? Want to give it a try?”

Richard turned slightly pale. He’d already been instructed in the dark arts Naya spoke of, understanding the excitement and bloodiness he mentioned. He still nodded with resolution, however, the sheer speed of the decision surprising the former Blade of Calamity. The killer who’d been unmatched in the underworld a decade ago couldn’t understand quite how someone with Richard’s illustrious background was so determined in his pursuit of the dark arts. It was to the point that one might suspect Richard had been born with perverted tendencies.

Actually, Richard’s mindset had been pretty simple when he made the decision. What would Gaton Archeron do? he asked himself, would he cower in fear? The answer was obviously no. Gaton had seen far more blood in his life, creating more scenes like this himself. Most importantly, his mother had told him— and he’d seen it for himself— that the man was completely fearless. That was why he decided to participate.

Seeing Richard starting to look pale yet determined, Naya shrugged, “Fine then, come. But first, prepare a bucket and make sure it’s big enough. You’ll need it.”



# Book 1, Chapter 37A - Blood and Purity

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Naya dragged the unconscious Blood Parrot back to the little tavern quite casually, as if she was just a bundle of supplies. The borders were quiet this far into the night, and even those who roamed the dark streets were nowhere to be seen. With the ruckus the mage enforcers had made with their arrival, all the doors and windows of the various alleys were shut tightly, with not a tiny crevice to peep through. The pressure of survival had broken all curiosity,

Richard followed silently, only looking slightly paler than normal. The hands hidden in his sleeves were clenched, however, and the muscles of his forearms kept twitching. Drops of fresh blood seeped out from between his fingers, the injury coming from the granules that unpolished metal bar had left on his palm. The wound had only been superficial at the start, but with the amount of pressure Richard was putting on his hand the pain from the wound was enough to suppress the wild throbbing of his heart. His mind was already a mess; had there been nobody around all he'd do was yell, kick, and smash everywhere. Only that would help him vent some of the extreme tension he'd just been through, even if it was slightly delayed.

This was the first time Richard had killed someone, and he had taken four lives in but a few moments. He'd slashed open that warrior with his own hands, damaging many organs and consigning him to a painful, fearful death. Inches away from his own demise, Richard had grown completely tranquil; awareness of movement turned into cold calculation, and every technique he'd learnt from Naya was utilised as if it was natural. The four assassins had all assumed Richard was just a rookie mage, and this thought had had them pay with their lives. Besides the fireball killing one of their numbers, the other three had died to Richard's astonishing proficiency at the assassination arts. When it came

down to it, even that fireball's timing had to do with such techniques.

Battles of the underworld determined life and death in but a single brush with the opponent. In that decisive battle Richard had felt like he was in a dream; a real and chilling dream, filled with numbers. He only woke up once Blackgold had left, leaving his nervousness, frailty, nausea, and all sorts of negatives to erode away at his heart.

Besides the distress of killing someone for the first time, Richard was also very nervous about Blood Parrot's upcoming fate, in a way that he could not describe. For some reason Naya's carefreeness only increased his nervousness.

He'd always been meticulous with observations, and he'd noticed the look of unease on the faces of Naya's companions when he hoisted her up. For but a moment, even Blood Parrot herself hadn't been able to hide the terror and despair on her face before fainting.

Naya's words told Richard that Blood Parrot had possessed some reputation in the underworld even a decade ago. For someone like that to grow so tense and fearful, what was it that Naya would show him soon? The very thought of the bucket Naya had reminded him to bring caused Richard's stomach to churn, and he felt the urge to find a corner and vomit everything in his stomach immediately. Naya was just like Sharon and many of the grand mages, never joking in proper matters.

While he wanted to throw up right away, Richard still gritted his teeth and followed behind Naya, persisting all the way to the tavern. Even he himself felt like that was a miracle.

Naya's two companions seemed to shed all their sloth the moment the Blade of Calamity left, clearing up the bodies and cleaning the scene with unbelievable speed. In mere minutes all traces had been wiped away, the only remains of the battle being the marks made by the tongues of flame in the depths of the alley.

When the people at the borders walked outside their homes early morning, they would feel like nothing happened that night. With the chaos in the borders they'd long since grown used to tremors, explosions, and all sorts of strange sounds. Deepblue law stated any breaking and entering of the houses or damaging outer walls was an invasion of the Deepblue itself, so such things were definitely disallowed. Their houses were thus safe havens from the outside world, only affecting the residents if the people themselves were too curious for their own good.

Naya dragged Blood Parrot through the tiny lobby, past the counter and into the kitchen at the back. Richard found that the kitchen in the tavern was strangely large, seemingly larger than the lobby itself. There were many liquor and food cabinets beside the stove, and there were iron rings large and small nailed into the wall. There were also a few block and tackle that hung from the ceiling, with many iron hooks of varying sizes hung down from there as well.

The concentrated smell of soot and poor alcohol permeated the air. However, these two strong odours could not suppress the smell of mould around. The walls and floor were all made of stone and had been washed clean. However, there were still irregular and faint marks left behind over a large area.

"Close the door properly," Naya instructed, dragging Blood Parrot to the middle of the kitchen.

Richard did as he asked, seeing that there really was a rather large wooden bucket behind the door. The bucket seemed quite old, and although it had been washed clean with no strange smell Richard couldn't hold the intense reactions of his body anymore. He bent over the bucket's side abruptly, beginning to throw up.

Not having had the chance for dinner, there was little food that came out. Most was clear gastric acid, the strong smell filling his senses and covering all the other smells in the kitchen. However, this suppression revealed a faint smell that hadn't been too

obvious before. Richard could determine the source in an instant; this was a residue of years of blood and grit.

It was terrible that he found out at this moment, because his body's instincts now had the upper hand. His stomach churned intensely and practically contracted, basically spurting acid from his mouth.

Naya seemed to have guessed Richard's reaction, just sending him a nonchalant glance before beginning his own work. He pulled the iron hooks on the ceiling down to the tune of a crash, piercing them into Blood Parrot's limbs. She was suspended in the air with a pull of the chain, her limbs stretched out in various directions.

The immense pain made her regain consciousness, crying out on instinct. The assassin immediately stopped once she grew lucid, however, relaxing her body and taking a look at her surroundings. Despair immediately flashed in her eyes when she saw Naya, however, and she couldn't help but sigh.

Naya stretched out his hands, squeezing and caressing her body absently. His obscene expression made him seem extremely vulgar, but these caresses robbed Blood Parrot of her strength, ceasing her struggles and replacing them with complete despair.

Naya hummed a little song off-key, beginning to remove Blood Parrot's clothing piece by piece. Only after he took the last bit of cloth off did he stop, leaving her hanging naked in the centre of the kitchen just like that. Her damaged muscles and nerves caused her to twitch on occasion, but strangely enough the pierced spots didn't bleed much. The blood only crept out slowly, dripping to the ground.

Richard finally stood up. He was looking deathly pale, only able to hold himself steady by supporting himself with the wall. He wiped at some of the filth that had splashed to his chest and mustered his courage to look up, gazing at Blood Parrot's naked body. He knew that what came next was the true test.

Blood Parrot was probably past middle age, but her great power had allowed her appearance and body to be maintained in a very young state. No matter how one looked at it, she did not seem to be over thirty. Her tight and powerful legs, chest, and bottom were excessively curvy, something quite enticing for men. Her appearance and body were her greatest weapons, but now they weren't enticing to Richard. He instead remained extremely focused on it, because the numbers he saw there were strange.

# Book 1, Chapter 37B - Blood and Purity

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The tears continued to surge out uncontrollably, causing Richard's vision to blur. In that moment, he felt like he saw that arrogant and despotic face of his father, with a pair of eyes so calm they could make one shiver.

Father... This word held no warmth or familiarity for Richard. It only aroused hatred, bringing forth a cold and stifling pressure. He had no idea of how much strength his father possessed, and every time he recalled the man he could only judge him to be enigmatic and unmeasurable. Were Gatón here, would he find this hard to stomach?

Richard thus strived to turn up whenever he won control of his body, keeping his eyes wide open to watch what Naya was doing. He wiped away the tears that blurred his sight, shook away the buzzing in his ears so he could hear Naya clearly. When his body was so fatigued he just wanted to fall to the ground, he took hold of the metal rings on the wall and used them alongside the wooden bucket to stay upright in the least.

Richard vaguely saw Naya chattering away like some old man, using his hands to search Blood Parrot's body carefully without leaving out an inch. Every place his hands passed ended up with large splatters of blood, something Richard's body wanted to avoid with all strength. The boy couldn't understand well what Naya was doing on his own, but Precision and Wisdom showed him the cold truth.

There was a sharp pain coming from his abdomen that almost caused him to faint, to the point that he suspected his stomach wasn't whole. All sorts of filth was splattered on his body, but he couldn't feel that anymore. The kitchen was filled with the fresh smell of sweet blood, completely suppressing the years upon years of rot.

There were no extra sounds in this space. Blood Parrot hadn't made a peep since that first scream, and the only sounds besides Richard's occasional dry heave was the slight whoosh of Naya's fingers as he worked, alongside a brush that seemed to be a highland peacock feather scribbling on parchment.

Naya quickened his motions and created hundreds of gestures in a moment with his two hands. However, each movement was extremely clear. A splendid blood rose bloomed into the sky, right in Richard's view.

It truly was a rose. When it blossomed on Blood Parrot's body, one could even see the young petals trembling! It took up all of Richard's vision, and by the time it faded all he could see was Naya handing something thin over to him. Although he didn't know what this was at the start, the full wooden bucket tipped over once he got a closer look, spilling filth all over him.

The magic patterns stained in blood were something familiar to him, patterns he could draw with his eyes closed: Buff rune, Elementary Agility.

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Richard had no idea how he managed to clean his clothes of the filth, or leave Naya's tavern. When his body finally calmed down the rune was left lingering in his vision, as well as all sorts of bizarre weapons. Blood Parrot's body and looks had been disposed of from his memory, the only vestiges of her existence being her voice. Naya hadn't been able to gather any information from Blood Parrot at all. Perhaps she'd persisted all the to the end, but perhaps Naya just hadn't given her the chance to speak at all.

A long, dark alley stretched out in front of Richard, going into the depths of darkness with no seeming end. The few dim lamps couldn't light the entire place, each one not nearly as bright as the ones in the main tower. Every time Richard walked from post to post his shadow would grow longer.

He felt extremely cold, fatigue and hunger assailing his senses even as his mouth and throat seemed to burn with fire. Richard had long since vomited everything that he could, and having used Eruption multiple times in a row his stamina was drained completely as well. Only now, when he was relaxing his tense nerves, did everything start to act up. He felt like he couldn't take the smallest of steps forward, but by this time a familiar door had already appeared in front of him.

This was where Erin lived.

Richard had no idea why he had returned to this place. However, after seeing this door, all the events of the night linked together like lightning. He seemed to come out from under a rock, the truth of the matter spiralling in his mind. Perhaps this was just a guess, but Richard knew it was likely true. So many coincidences would not occur in the real world. Blood Parrot and those killers had been waiting for Richard in advance, and Erin had been the bait to lure him into the trap.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Richard knocked the door.

A window at the side suddenly opened, and a head full of fat peeked out. Without his eyes fully open, he looked extremely ferocious, and he kept mumbling things that could not be heard clearly. Evidently he was annoyed at being disturbed from his sleep, but seeing Richard's attire the head went back in a hundred times as fast as it had come out. The window closed rapidly, without making too much noise. This technique was miraculous in its own way.

Without his outer robes on, the complex and extravagant patterns sewn all over Richard's clothes had been on display. This was no decoration, instead a real magic formation that had protected him from the first assassin's dagger earlier in the night. Only those of the Deepblue's main tower with talent, bloodline, background, and hateful luck could wear such clothing.



Bang! Richard smashed on the door once more, this time much louder than before. However, nobody dared to open their windows again. A small fist-sized slot on the door that was meant for letters was opened up, revealing Erin's guarded face. She made a sound of surprise at the very sight of Richard, pulling the door open.

After the door opened completely Richard saw Erin with a wand held tightly in her hand. The materials showed it was the most ordinary of wands, and the gems embedded within could store two grade 1 spells at most. Still, such devices could cast spells instantly, and the power of two grade 1 spells was not to be trifled with in the borders. While Erin herself was already a level 3 mage, it was still difficult to cast a grade 2 spell for her. It was also impossible for her to cast grade 1 spells instantly, and in a real battle the opponent would've come over and sent her to the ground with a few slaps before she could finish a chant.

Low level mages were useless in solo battles. Only with the help of wands, magic rings, or scrolls could they take such fights.

Seeing Erin holding that wand tightly, Richard felt something inside himself. He instantly got a better understanding of her usual living conditions: only in an environment where danger was everywhere would she have such an instinct for self-preservation. Even if this wand was weak, the worst of wands was still worth four or five hundred gold coins minimum. Although this was nothing in the Deepblue, for someone like Erin who had debts of 1600 coins she couldn't pay this was a huge amount. That she would rather shoulder a debt for this wand meant that she would feel no sense of security without it.

# Book 1, Chapter 37C - Blood and Purity

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Richard noticed a great many things in that moment. Erin looked like she just wanted to jump into his embrace the moment she rushed out to stand in front of him, but she suppressed it and instead pulled Richard into the room. Taking a look outside, she closed the door with a bang and locked it. Her chest heaved as she stared at him, back to the door. A flush crept up her body, making her emotions obvious.

Richard sized up the room. This was a very small, utilitarian place, formed of two rooms and a little bathroom. Its size was pitiful, with just the bedroom having a window to the patio while all the other rooms just had four walls. The room also had a magic lamp, but it wasn't lit. In its place was a candle.

The small room with a single bed and cupboard was full of the smell of candle smoke and the girl's own scent. The bathroom was barely large enough for one to shower in, while the hall wasn't much larger than the bedroom itself. There were many things in the hall, but they were arranged neatly to make good enough use of the space to not seem cramped.

As Richard was looking around, Erin noticed that her own hand was slightly sticky. Raising it to take a look in the candlelight, she found her palm was full of blood! She suddenly noticed the blood flowing out from between Richard's fingers.

She recalled that she'd pulled on Richard's hands to bring him into the room, and couldn't help but exclaim, "You're hurt?!"

Richard waved his hand and answered nonchalantly, "It's just a small wound, nothing much." This really was how he felt, especially after he'd seen the entire process of Naya dealing with Blood Parrot.

However, Erin had a clear view of his palm. The skin had already been cut open by the coarse surface of the metal bar, and with

Richard applying the pressure he did to it the wound looked terrifying. It was as if his entire hand had split apart!

She couldn't help but raise her voice, shouting, "How did you get hurt? They told me they wouldn't really hurt you..."

Erin cupped her mouth the moment these words left her, turning pale. Richard looked up at her without the slightest of astonishment, his piercing gaze sweeping past her face to record her reaction. The gaze grew calm and distant, his voice peaceful as he said, "So you did have a part in this. Tell me, who was it?"

The calmer Richard was, the colder Erin felt. She subconsciously grabbed at her collar and looked down, speaking so softly it was almost indiscernible, "Minnie. She looked for me and told... told me to lure you here, saying she had something personal to speak to you about. I... I couldn't reject her, so I could only agree.

"But she promised she definitely wouldn't hurt you! She also said that you're Her Excellency's favourite student, so how would she dare harm you?"! Erin's voice became louder and louder, and seemed more like she was convincing herself.

On the other hand, Richard was calm and asked, "Minnie? How much did she give you, and what was the reason you couldn't reject her?"

Erin gradually calmed down and laughed wryly, "A total of 500 gold coins, and she also agreed not to cause trouble for my father."

"500 gold coins? So that's how little I'm worth. However, with your father involved, I guess that's enough." Richard smiled self-mockingly and looked at Erin. The smile on his face gradually vanished, and he enquired, "You've sold your first time as well, right? Can you tell me how much you did it for?"

Erin paled in that instant, and hung her head lower. It took her a while to speak, "2000 gold goins."

"Four normal mana potions," Richard compared rather brutally.

He then pressed on, “Who was it? Why were you willing to earn his money and not mine?”

This was a very old question and one that had been raised before. This time, Erin did not choose to evade it. She seemed to have nothing left to lose, and answered quickly, “Steven, another of Her Excellency’s apprentices. I was in urgent need of money then and he made the request right at that time. I... I’m just a normal person living in the borders and somewhat managed to make contact with the nobility. With his power and status, I couldn’t reject him.”

“Steven...” Richard contemplated over the name. It was like the most important piece of a puzzle had fallen into place, slowly revealing the outline of a scheme. However, even if he could understand it that violent blood within him was beginning to twitch.

“How much are you now?” Richard’s words caused Erin to involuntarily tremble, and as if unable to bear the cold she answered in a whisper, “Besides Steven, there hasn’t been anyone else. He sometimes looks for me and gives me 200 or 300 gold coins each time. Sometimes, when I... I’m in dire need, I’ll look for him as well...”

“How much are you now?” Richard asked once more.

Erin finally gritted out, “I owe you 1600 gold coins. If it’s you, 100 each time.”

Richard slowly reached out and grabbed at the front lapels of her clothing, the violent tendencies ravaging in his chest becoming dangerous and more difficult to hold in. He suddenly wanted to see blood, and the matter that Erin had doing her best to avoid kept replaying in his mind.

“You betrayed me just for 500 gold coins and almost lost me my life?!” Richard gritted out, eyes now bloodshot. He abruptly pulled his hands apart, ripping Erin’s sleeping attire in two. He grabbed the girl and walked to the bedroom, tossing her on the bed and

pressing down!

Coarse gasps from the depths of the girl's throat mixed with bestial groans to fill every corner of the room. Erin was like a little boat being ravaged by a storm, her body arching and falling repeatedly without her bidding. Her hands gripped tightly on Richard's back, and when it grew hardest to endure she'd left behind ten deep marks of blood there. The great pain caused Richard to cry out, but it seemed to only fuel his fires. Erin's cries rose in pitch as well.

The storm continued for some time, leaving the two with no energy when they finally parted. With how small the bed was they were nestled up to each other, staring at the grey ceiling together. Nobody knew who started it, but the girl talked about herself while Richard listened silently.

Like the protagonist of many stories, Erin came from a small noble family. Her father was a knight from his family, with a small piece of land amounting to two villages. It was situated at the borders of the Sacred Tree Empire, adjacent to Marquess Niall's lands and not too far from Duke Solam's fief. Because Erin's father was thus a vassal of Marquess Niall, she couldn't say no to Minnie of Steven.

Erin's father was extremely taken with the arts, committed to socialising with the upper class. The one thing he was not proficient at was managing his own land, and over time the debts he had fallen into reached an astonishing number that couldn't be returned. Erin had been sent to the Deepblue to study magic at age ten, and she did have good aptitude in the field. However, that was by the standards of her father's lands. She was nothing in the Deepblue, and soon enough she'd used up all of her savings and the financial support from her family grew smaller and smaller. She could only rely on herself to continue her education and mere survival in the Deepblue, and with no money her progress had slowed.

The old knight had no money to support a growing mage in Deepblue, and he also did not want to nurture a great mage. What the knight truly wanted was the name of Deepblue, so that Erin could be sold for a good price. In the terms of the aristocracy, this meant that Erin could get married to a viscount, or be the mistress of some earl or marquess with some power. Without having been in the Deepblue, Erin could only be the wife of a baron, and depending upon circumstances even barons could ask for a dowry.

Hence, Erin used all her might to earn money, all so she could continue to stay in Deepblue. The moment she returned to her family, she would be used as a bargaining chip in a political marriage. On the other hand, there was another reason that the old knight had not forced her to return home. That was because his debts had escalated to a crisis for him, and his land could be taken at anytime. The reason the debtors had not forced the matter to the courts and had him declare bankruptcy was the future mage studying in the Deepblue. They didn't want to offend a possible great mage just to collect debts, so as long as she stayed in the Deepblue they would not go too far. Of course, if she was willing to return, the problem with the debts would also be easily solved. There was already an old widower viscount with ample assets willing to take on the knight's debts, but that was only if Erin agreed to marry him.

Minnie had obviously investigated Erin's background and knew her father's circumstances. If Erin was unwilling to cooperate, then she would use her own family's power and take away the knight's land. The knight had long since lost the means to return his debts, and with all his income going towards the interest he couldn't even keep up with his honourable lifestyle. The loss of his land was the loss of his noble reputation, and be it the knight or Erin herself this would lead to a drop in status.

Minnie had even hinted to Erin that she wanted to make contact with Richard. Making it seem like this was an issue between a boy

and a girl, she'd also promised never to hurt Richard. On top of that, wouldn't Her Excellency's might stop her?

"That's why I had no way to reject her." Having said this, the young girl reached out to grab Richard's hand, caressing the new wounds on his hands and asking, "They didn't do anything too harsh to you, right? Are your injuries serious?"

"It's nothing. Everything's taken care of." Richard said casually.

He did not state how things had been 'taken care of', nor did he want to explain the process. For Erin, Niall and Solam were two large mountains blocking basically everything in her way. Marquess Niall's battle failures were only news in the aristocracy for now, and there was a long way to go before it reached her ears.

However, despite her reasons, Erin had betrayed him for a mere 500 gold coins. In hindsight her decision seemed quite foolish, because she had no idea about Richard's background or anything about Sharon's relationship with the boy. However, most normal people didn't have as much information when they were making their decisions, so the foolishness or intelligence in those choices boiled down mostly to luck.

For Erin to give up the slight purity and persistence she possessed to Steven, the superficial reason was that she had debts she couldn't repay. However, the true reason for this debt being formed in the first place was that she and her family had no ability to bear the burden of living in the Deepblue.

"Then why don't you return? You can regain your life as a true noble and won't have to suffer so much," Richard asked.

"No! I'm not going back! That's just a tiny place in the outskirts, and you can't even imagine how dull and boring it is there. Even if I were to marry a viscount, that's only walking from a small village to a slightly larger village! Everyday, I'll live in a dark castle or a villa in a town, dealing with farmers, slaves, and servants. Every other year, I'll have a child and find a few nobles in nearby

territories to be my lover. That's the entirety of my life! In my lifetime, I can probably see an earl a few times. Things are different in Deepblue. Every inch of this place here is filled with dreams, and I can see people with great status in the continent here anytime. This is a place that can change my destiny!"

The girl's voice was filled with emotion and earnestness, but that only made Richard silent for a long time.

"Is it that important to stay in the Deepblue?"

"Very much so!"

Having been in the Deepblue for nearly three years, Richard had seen too many people struggling everyday, only so that they could continue staying here. As long as they could stay, they were willing to give up everything. Before this day, Richard had been unperturbed by all this and had no prejudices nor sympathy for these people. Now, however, when the same thing was happening to Erin, he felt a sense of pain in his heart.

Some time later, Richard said dully, "Alright, I understand."



# Book 1, Chapter 38 - Burying Boyhood

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The candles finally burnt through, and the room descended into darkness. After passing that storm on a scale she'd never experienced before, making her worries and dreams known, Erin began to feel waves of fatigue hitting her. Her eyelids grew heavy as lead, able to finally close without resistance.

The slumber was anything but peaceful, riddled with many strange dreams. Most of them were meaningless and grotesque images, but there was one dream that made her heart skip a beat. In it she owed Richard a great amount of money, and he came every night to collect the debt. Each night he'd 'collect' a number of times, but the debt continued to snowball...

When she opened her eyes once more, Erin was greeted by the sight of a familiar ceiling. The curtains that had been pulled and flattened vigorously the night before, not closed properly yet. Faint light shot down from the window, meaning it was noon in the world outside.

Startled, she quickly sat up. She'd gotten used to a packed schedule so she could alleviate her debts even slightly, and there had never been a day when she'd slept in. It was only once she sat up that she abruptly remembered— where was Richard?

The bed was void of anyone else, and on Richard's side was a piece of paper that looked extremely familiar in style and format.

This was a receipt, a cheque for 31,600 gold coins signed by Richard himself. Even once she paid off her debts this amount would allow Erin to live extravagantly at the border for three years.

The huge sum it represented added great weight to this thin piece of paper. However, even as she held onto this card that would change her fate, Erin's heart was filled with an empty desolation. Tears beaded down her face in large droplets, unable to be stopped.

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A thin layer of clouds had gathered above Floe Bay, and the sunlight that occasionally passed through it gave the crystalline waves of the great sea a smatter of brightness. The surface may have thawed, but there were still some scattered icebergs that glimmered attractively under the sunshine.

The skies were still dim with the lack of sun, and the winds extremely cold. A gale caught the edges of Richard's long robes, allowing the cold inside and causing the youth to shiver.

Richard was stood by the sea, a cliff only a few metres in front of him that went straight down into the water. The waves crashed into the rugged rocks to cause giant splashes on occasion, some of the surf actually reaching the sides of his feet even though the cliff was high and steep. One had to know Richard was stood about twenty metres away from the sea—the seemingly calm waters occasionally exploded forth with shocking might.

The 'rock' under his feet was a dark reef, many deep crevices within owing to the constant erosion of the waves and the sea breeze. Small white flowers grew at the sides of the rock, a common sight in Floe Bay. The cecilian had the tenacity to grow in any environment, present all year round even in the north where the temperature was below ten degrees for most of the year. The flowers lay frozen in ice at night, but once it melted slightly they would grow frail branches and leaves, bursting forth with life.

Richard wandered aimlessly by the sea, occasionally bending down to pick one of the flowers up. He'd gathered an entire bouquet in a short while; even if the flowers didn't seem gorgeous, when bunched together their plain purity made them look beautiful. He then climbed up a little hill, arriving at an expansive view that allowed him to see the curve of the bay's horizon. Behind him was the majestic Deepblue.

The sea breeze blew into his face, cold and wet. The great waves

cried out in a low tone, but nobody could tell what they were saying.

Richard leant over and began to dig at the cold soil with his fingers, creating a tiny pit. He then placed the little bouquet of flowers inside and buried it gently. He suddenly felt much more relaxed when he stood back up. Facing the sea breeze, he took a deep breath of the chilly winds. Right now, he felt like even the strong fishy smell displayed the massive magnificence of Floe Bay...

He turned to leave, dark magic robes flying in the wind. Buried on that hill was the inexperience, purity, and once-beautiful dreams of a youth...

Back at the Deepblue, Richard returned to the places he was most familiar with. Once more he began his tight schedule that any onlookers would find stifling. Erin, Minnie, Blood Parrot, and Steven... if the leads were put together the truth of the matter would be out, and Richard believed that Sharon and the grand mages could see it if he could. Richard had no intentions of taking the initiative and asking how they dealt with the matter, prepared to forget everything and immerse himself in his exploration of magic.

At this point, the youth understood that every step he took forward was a huge blow to opponents like Steven and Minnie. The path to becoming a runemaster was tough, and only one person in the Deepblue would be allowed to walk through. This was a battle that nobody could afford to give up on.

In many situations, strength only had meaning when it was compared. The more powerful one was, the weaker their opponents would be in relation. Richard now understood that the rate of his improvement in the various domains of magic would cause other resolute people to be stifled and feel despair.

A blood-dyed conspiracy gradually disappeared into the dust of

history, as if nothing had ever happened. Not even a trace of a rumour about the night had appeared in the Deepblue. No apprentice of Sharon's had faced assassination, and the mage enforcers had never come out to maintain the peace. Nobody took notice of the marks from the flames in the depths of that alley, as if that was just more vandalism by a bored wanderer.

Of course, there had to be consequences. In fact, the consequences of this conspiracy were dire, but the information was only limited to a small number of related personnel. Information brokers were always attentive, and knew very well what could be sold and what would curse their lives. If the higher-ups of the Deepblue had yet to conclude an incident, then it did not exist. It would naturally not be sold.

From the night that contact was lost with Blood Parrot, Steven grew extremely uneasy. Richard's daily routine was as precise as that of a machine, and all aspects of the trap had been arranged flawlessly. If the fish did not bite the bait, then a few other plans would immediately begin.

Things had begun extremely smoothly, and everything had gone according to plan, up till the scheduled time when Blood Parrot had sent a signal that the target had entered the assassination zone.

What came next was the part that Steven was most proud of in this plan. Blood Parrot had once objected, saying the plan was well thought out and made great use of the terrain, but even if it prevented anyone interfering in the assassination by accident it would need seven people to be executed. The target was a mere rank 3 rookie mage, while all of them were assassins above rank 10; just a single person could take care of him. Even without the high costs of using so many people, having so many hitmen sneaking into the Deepblue in a short period of time was also troublesome. However, in the end, Blood Parrot's side still accepted this, because the one who handed out the money was boss.

Based on Blood Parrot's style of killing in one strike and this plan that had been perceived to be excessively well thought out, three minutes was enough no matter how cautious the target was.

Three minutes was just the time to savour a bit of red wine, which was why Steven had poured himself a shallow glass of strong, aged ale. He sat by the window, admiring the night scenery of Floe Bay, swirling his wine and drinking slowly. It had to be said that no matter how terrible a reputation or how evil the grey dwarves were deemed to be, the wine they brewed was of great quality. Steven had been extremely patient and very confident. When dealing with an opponent like Richard, it was never excessive to be cautious. Blood Parrot was a mere assassin, so how could she know the principle of a lion using all its strength to catch even just a rabbit?

He soon saw the bottom of the glass of ale, but there was no news. He'd frowned slightly, but he continued to sit firm in place as Minnie poured him his second glass. That time, it was almost half-full.

The grey dwarves' strong ale was stronger than humans' brandy, and half a glass was enough to get a person with average tolerance drunk. That was why Steven did not drink too quickly. Blood Parrot was a prudent person and had to be carefully cleaning up the area, not leaving behind any traces. This was no small issue. If this were to be exposed, Steven had no idea of how to deal with it.

Using his family and father? That wasn't quite possible. The legendary mage had already used her actions to prove that she was not afraid of shadow antimages, and Duke Solam had unexpectedly donated a huge amount of money to her. That alone spoke volumes about the results of the battle between legends.

However, if he succeeded and was not caught, the situation would completely change. Nobody would suspect a talented runemaster for the sake of the dead person. As for the Archerons, his own family would naturally deal with them. As he'd taken care

of an up-and-coming star, the family assembly would probably give him great merit.

Blood Parrot had brought a total of six people. No matter how meticulous one was, using six to kill a rookie mage required not more than ten minutes. Ten minutes was the perfect time to slowly savour half a glass of strong alcohol.

# Book 1, Chapter 39A - Terror

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The bottom of the glass had been seen once again, but there was still no news. Steven had grown slightly dizzy, wondering if he'd drunk the alcohol too quickly. Minnie, on the other hand, poured him another round; this one a full glass. It rekindled the dragon warlock's hope, and he began to savour it slowly once more. This was a critical moment, and every person of greatness would have moments such as this. The commonality between those who were great was that they grew calmer the more crucial it was. Steven, for all his ambitions, had read many biographies at a young age. He naturally knew such things well. He thus kept his cool, remaining proud in his patience.

The glass was emptied again; and filled again, and emptied again. Once he'd gotten through the entire bottle, Steven could maintain his calm no more. It had been two whole hours! That was more than enough to kill an entire street of people! However, the news was like a stone that had sunk into the sea, nowhere in sight. It never came. Be it success or failure, he didn't know!

Cold sweat suddenly broke out and soaked his clothes through. When he raised his head and widened his eyes, he saw a Minnie that was just as pale in his blurred vision holding the empty bottle and trembling slightly. She grew shocked when he grabbed her hand, to the point that the bottle crashed down and shattered to pieces. Steven did not get mad over that, however, instead grasping her hand and stroking it gently.

Minnie's hands were ice-cold in her worry and fear, as if they had just been washed in ice water. In the past she could consider herself separate from the matter and watch on as a bystander, but now she was deeply involved in this conspiracy. Her fate was tightly linked to Steven's own.

Minnie did not even dare consider the consequences of this conspiracy failing. Even Randolph's end wouldn't be a reasonable

punishment if she was found out.

“So? Should we flee?” Steven suddenly asked. Fear had already taken over his heart, causing him to lose his rationality. All he wanted now was to leave the Deepblue as quickly as possible and flee to his family’s territory. His future, being a runemaster, the glory— everything that he’d once been willing to give up everything for was suddenly so insignificant compared to his life.

On the contrary, Minnie remained calm in this moment. She drew her hand back and grabbed Steven’s palm, speaking in as calm a voice as she could muster, “No, we can’t flee. Floe Bay is over six thousand kilometres from the Sacred Tree Empire, escape wouldn’t be practical. Besides, are you confident in being able to escape a legendary mage? We wouldn’t be able to escape even one of the seventeen grand mages for more than a hundred kilometres.”

These words finally calmed Steven down a bit, and he began to count on a fluke, “Perhaps they’ve already succeeded...” However, halfway through his sentence, he halted. Even when the alcohol had dulled his senses and his mind he knew that conjecture was laughable.

“What should we do now?” Steven was now completely at a loss. Minnie, who still remained calm, was the only thing he could grasp at to steady himself.

“Don’t do anything!”

“Are we just going to wait?”

Minnie shook her head, “Of course not. I’m saying that we can’t execute any more schemes to target Richard. Nothing at all. Now, if we want to keep ourselves alive, we can only ask for help from our families. Tell them everything that’s happened, and see what they can do for us. If our families are willing to offer enough compensation, then Her Excellency might forgive us.”



Minnie's words left Steven dismayed and full of despair. He hung his head and grasped at his hair, mumbling, "What can they help me with? There's nothing! What I've done is no trivial matter. The person I want to kill is Richard, the legendary mage's little lover! Even Father can't do anything. Though he hasn't said anything, I know that he must have lost the battle with Sharon... Ah, no! There's one more way! Declare war! Declare war on the Deepblue! Deepblue has a bunch of mages, but not enough military! Why didn't I think of this? I should get my father to lead an army to attack the Deepblue..."

Minnie shook Steven as hard as she could, but the dragon warlock's brain had completely been taken over by the alcohol, and the more he said, the louder he got. While this was his personal residence, Minnie was not sure that there was no magic surveillance or any peeping devices secretly installed here.

Declare war? Declare war on the Deepblue? Even if the Deepblue's military power was weak, Solam would have to fight through six thousand kilometres of the Sacred Alliance to get to it!

Seeing that this wasn't enough to stop Steven, Minnie simply carried a basin of ice-cold water and splashed it over his head.

Steven shivered and immediately jumped up. The cold that seeped into his very bones dispelled the effects of the alcohol, and helped him become sober. Seeing the slightly panicked Minnie, he then took another basin of cold water and poured it over his head, shaking hard. With a clang, he tossed the copper basin to the ground.

"We haven't reached the point of complete despair yet..." Steven said slowly. While his voice had gone completely hoarse, the dragon warlock could still give confidence. He pondered over this and walked around in circles. The effects of the alcohol were quickly vanishing, and after suppressing the panic and terror that had been difficult to hold in, various ways of dealing with the matter arose in his mind. While the chances of success were

miniscule, there was still hope.

After walking a few rounds like this, Steven quickly made a decision, “Every action can be made up for. Prepare some magic paper and a pen for me, I want to write a few letters. You should also write a letter to Marquis Niall. At this point, he shouldn’t think this has nothing to do with him!”

Minnie quickly perked up, and prepared everything quickly. Steven sat at the table, his pen flying as he quickly wrote four letters. One was to the duke, and two others to Saint Klaus and his own mother. Unexpectedly, the recipient of the last letter was Blackgold.

After seeing the contents of the four letters, Minnie was silently startled. Steven was basically threatening Duke Solam. If the duke did not help him get past this, then he wouldn’t mind making a few things that the duke had been doing public. While he had only touched upon this briefly, even Minnie could see the seriousness of these things done in the dark. While they had nothing to do with the legendary mage, the moment they were made public, the emperor of the Sacred Alliance would immediately be furious. However, the most furious person here would not be that bloodthirsty sovereign of the Alliance, but Peter The Great, Emperor of the Sacred Tree Empire!

The letter to Blackgold was simple. It only showed that Steven was willing to discuss terms with him, and he was willing to consider anything.

Seeing Steven placing the letters into the magic formation, Minnie could not hold it back and asked, “Can this really work? There won’t be any turning back for you and your family!”

“Turning back?” Steven sneered, “Only if we can live past this can we even consider turning back.”

# Book 1, Chapter 39B - Terror

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Minnie nodded, spreading out a piece of paper to write a similar letter to her father, Marquis Niall. Having long been abandoned by the man, she had much less of a psychological burden in doing so. Every gold coin she could squeeze out of him would be additional income.

The light of the spell formation suddenly dimmed, completely devouring the four letters. Steven sent out a magic signal of the highest grade, gathering all of his subordinates in the Deepblue to his residence.

Minnie knew the significance of the signal, and could not hold herself back from asking, “Aren’t you exposing everyone now?”

Steven glanced at Minnie and then laughed deprecatingly, “Don’t be naive. Is there anything we have that they don’t know about?”

The dragon warlock subconsciously swivelled the magic ring on his finger, pondering over the current situation, “... Gathering all my people is also actually a show of my stance. It means that I’ve already completed failed and won’t do anything else. Only with this will the other side temporarily set aside thoughts of dealing me a fatal blow right away. Besides, this will also alarm the higher-ups of the Deepblue and make them do something. It would be the most terrifying if they did nothing at all.”

At this point, Steven was basically admitting that all their actions and plans had failed.

However, he thought of another possibility. Within his mind, he cursed at the old mage who had brought him around the Deepblue. It was this silver-tongued old man that had informed him that Richard was a future runemaster, and had also given him some other information. For instance, the fact that Richard was pursuing his education in the Deepblue alone. He had actually believed this and not confirmed it. How could a direct descendant

of a large family, who was an important person to be nurtured into a future runemaster, not have helpers by his side?

Steven assumed the helpers the Archerons had sent were twice as strong as the group of assassins that was between levels 10 and fourteen. This might wasn't anything to worry about, but the few people he had by his side couldn't match up to that. He'd just made use of direct violence, something forbidden in the Deepblue, so all the higher-ups had to do was remain silent and not intervene in the upcoming battle... At this thought, the fearless dragon warlock shivered.

A moment later, the warrior from before entered the residence. He looked terrible, his eyes sunken and bloodshot. He'd evidently been anxious throughout the night.

He knelt immediately at the sight of Steven, speaking gravely, "Young Master, there has yet to be any news. I am planning to investigate..."

Steven waved his hand and stopped him, "There's no need to investigate. Bring your people back later, all the orders I had for you are cancelled. Do whatever you wish and act as you normally do when you don't have orders. If... If you hear any news then tell me, but do not look for information. Is that understood?"

The warrior was slightly confused at first, but when he soon understood what Steven was implying he turned more grim than before. Steven glanced at the magic clock, frowning as he asked, "Where's the cleric? Why isn't he here yet?"

Just as Steven was about to get impatient from waiting, the cleric finally arrived. While looking all mysterious, he dragged a large rectangular box and entered, placing it carefully on the ground before bowing to Steven.

"Young master, I discovered this item by chance. It's said that this is a magic puppet that Richard once used, and because there was no value in repairing it, it was going to be sent to be resmelted.

However, I thought it was valuable and that you needed to take a look, so I bought it with 30,000 gold coins,” the cleric said.

30,000 gold coins? Even a magic puppet in the Deepblue was worth a mere thousand, much less one that had been beaten up to the point that it was irreparable. This caused the two to grow extremely curious, while only the warrior doubted the price the cleric had paid out of competition. A puppet that cost not more than 2000 gold coins had been bought with 30,000; the discrepancy was too large. Whether the extent or quantity, both had far surpassed Steven’s bottom line.

The cleric knew how serious this was, and did not spend any more time keeping this a mystery. He immediately took the puppet out and explained quickly:

The one in charge of destroying and melting this puppet down was an able aide of Blackgold’s, and he’d kept muttering to his subordinates that it was extremely strange. Some of the cleric’s friends were amongst these subordinates, so the cleric heard about it and rushed over quickly.

The aide was quite similar to the grey dwarf himself; almost stubbornly persistent in obeying the laws of the Deepblue, but affected by a high enough price. Taking a look at the puppet Richard had used, the cleric had decided to bring it back to Steven immediately, so he’d bought it for the unimaginable price of 30,000 gold coins.

The moment the puppet was taken out, the damage marks on it caught Steven’s attention. The spots of blood left behind were shocking, causing him to reach out and lightly touch the depressions and cracks on the puppet. He asked the warrior, “What do you think?”

The warrior looked serious, “It doesn’t seem like a special move for a specific area, so he should have been hitting it at random. But that strength... It’s terrifying! Only trained level 10 warriors can

have such explosive strength! This puppet should be about the level of a knight in half-body plate armour; in other words, Richard is strong enough to the point that he can kill a knight with one punch... Isn't he a mage, though?"

Although he'd been quite sure of how the assassination attempt had played out, Steven's guesses took a strange direction once he looked at this puppet. An acolyte with the power of a level 10 warrior? Another chill surged into him. Although it wasn't all that unthinkable—racial gifts, bloodline abilities, and some powerful magic items could provide such pure strength—how many other secrets did Richard have that he didn't know of?

For the first time, Steven felt that he had chosen the wrong opponent. But then again, it wasn't his choice; he was merely an apprentice paying for himself, and Sharon would only nurture one runemaster.

"Why didn't you give it to me earlier?!" Steven yelled at the cleric.

The cleric had nothing to say in response, because he'd only gotten this news that morning. Being able to bring the puppet back was already the most he could do. How could it be done quicker?

When Steven's anger calmed slightly, the warrior reminded him, "Young master, the puppet's head..."

It was only now that Steven realised this was a headless puppet. The head, which should have been the most crucial part, had disappeared, the slit at the neck very smooth. There was no cut from the other side, and it was difficult to determine how it had been sliced off. Seeing Steven's gaze shift in his direction, the cleric immediately said, "The aide said the head was special, so Blackgold took it for himself. He said it was a collectible that could be sold, but it would be very expensive. At least 100,000 coins..."

A very special head?

“I’ll give you 150 000. Get me that head!” Steven no longer cared about the costs. At the very least, he wanted to know his opponent well and find out how he had lost, and therefore calculate his next move.

The cleric took a look at the warrior and suggested, “Young Master, how about having someone else go instead?”

Steven shook his head, saying, “No, you go. I believe in you!”

The cleric left, looking incredibly touched. Right before leaving, he glared hard at the warrior, eyes full of fierceness.

Steven did not have to wait too long. The cleric was back in a mere half hour, a defeated look on his face as he held an intricate locked copper box in hand. He was hesitant, unwilling to open it, but Steven seized it without a word and opened it with a bang, dragging out the head within. He was then stunned.

This was the head of a puppet as bright and clean as a mirror, looking so new it could reflect one’s appearance. This was indeed very special compared to the body, but that was because there was no damage whatsoever to it.

“Just this cost 150 000 gold coins?” Steven’s voice was so cold that it was like a gale blowing in hell, and sweat soaked the cleric’s back as he could only reply in the affirmative.

Steven suddenly burst into laughter and tossed the head of the puppet into the garbage bin in the distance, “Good, you did this well! It’s good as long as you could spend the money!”

The warrior and cleric both found this behaviour strange, while only Minnie knew what was going on. However, she could not laugh out like Steven was doing. Every dent, every bit of blood on the body of the puppet weighed on her mind. From this puppet she saw a crazed and animalistic Richard, a volcano about to erupt at any point that he usually kept hidden in the depths of his heart. If she had a second chance, she definitely would not choose an enemy

like him, just like Steven who was currently yelling abnormally. Why hadn't they seen this puppet earlier?

That was how Minnie knew that Steven was in an even worse mood. However, the fact that Blackgold was willing to take the money was a silver lining, some good news in the darkness...

In the meanwhile, Blackgold was in a rather good mood as well. Humming a warsong of the Stormhammer tribe, he was organising the Deepblue's accounts. In the small category called unexpected income were two numbers; first 30,000 and next 150,000. He looked at them again and again in satisfaction after writing them, like each was a huge precious stone. The cost of this transaction was less than ten coins, the amount he'd recover for melting the steel from the puppet; to sell something that should have been tossed into a large furnace for such an astronomical figure was like reaching a new realm of artistic attainment. Who said being a financial officer was just about taking charge of the bills?

The additional income had Blackgold's senses soaring, and he did not find this amount of money difficult to deal with at all. Since all the money was going into the Deepblue's warehouse, he was willing to accept the money regardless of the quantity.



# Book 1, Chapter 40 - Reopening the Gate

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No matter how much concentration one had, how slow they were, it wouldn't take too long to write these two numbers down. The grey dwarf unwillingly closed the book of accounts and took out a report related to Richard and began to read. This day-to-day account recorded Richard's daily activities, lessons, and all sorts of expenses, arranged according to time. There was a report similar to this everyday, and there was not much variety in the content. After seeing the densely-packed lessons and experiments, the grey dwarf could not help but feel dizzy. Sometimes, he wondered if Richard was even human or if he was a magic puppet with a refined metal core. Otherwise, how could he spend years studying, studying and studying every single day with basically no time for entertainment?

Even though his own schedule was packed, Blackgold knew well that some of what he called work was extremely entertaining; gemstone appraisal an example. Richard, on the other hand, lived in the most rigorous way that used his time optimally, with no personal hobbies.

Seeing the densely packed day-to-day account, the grey dwarf's breathing involuntarily became rough. Just seeing this list was giving him a huge amount of pressure. If one were to see a list like this everyday, the accumulated pressure would definitely make anyone go mad.

He suddenly sympathised with Steven, thinking that what this guy had done was not as foolish as he had assumed. If he and Steven were in different positions, perhaps the grey dwarf would long since have made a move. Richard was like an ancient behemoth, anything in his way ruthlessly sent flying, and Steven had the misfortune of being right there. Without Richard, then the dragon warlock would likely blossom in the Deepblue. It wasn't his fault that Sharon had such a strange rule as to only allow one

apprentice runemaster.

Sometimes, luck was a factor that could decide everything. Steven was obviously an unlucky guy, and his strength... The grey dwarf looked at the day-to-day account again, feeling that Steven did not seem to have the upper hand anymore. With Richard's current progress he would far surpass the dragon warlock when he reached the same age.

The Archerons were a bunch of lunatics, and Richard truly was one of them. Although he only had average magic talent, he was actually able to match up to the others' improvement in mana with just diligence, and his terrifying talent at runecrafting was just incomprehensible.

If that was the case... The grey dwarf suddenly had a whole bunch of thoughts, and his heart began to pound from excitement. In his eyes Steven was a dying mine, but even a mine that was starting to get exhausted could still draw a lot of value. For instance, there would be fragments of ores scattered around the main vein, associated minerals, and even the slag could be used to extract many uncommon metals. Of course, that was only with the smelting techniques of the dwarves. Back in the day, the grey dwarf had started out by buying abandoned mines at a low price.

If Steven could be excavated, he was even more valuable than ten abandoned mines.

The grey dwarf had already thought up quite a few plans and run them through his mind, finding them feasible. Duke Solam would eventually find himself on the losing end in the future, but what could he do? Challenge the Deepblue? That wasn't an option at all. Change the target of his hatred to Richard? Good idea, but a mere viscount of the Archeron Family could defeat an allied army of Solam and Niall. What would he do provoking Gatton, who'd used a mere thirteen rune knights to establish a presence in Faust? The grey dwarf felt like a legendary being wouldn't be that stupid.

The Deepblue continued to operate in peace and order that day, as if none of the disharmonious incidents had occurred. The next day was the same, and the one after that, and the one after that... There was no change whatsoever, as if Blood Parrot and her companions had never appeared in the Deepblue.

Then came the day for Sharon to decide everyone's rewards again. The discussion still occurred in that meeting room with hills and water, and the grand mages were delighted to see Her Excellency having returned to normal... Well, at least her taste had returned to normal; the two large gold pots of fruit next to the soft couch were obvious proof of that.

Her face was shining and her eyes were clear and bright. An astounding amount of vitality emanated from her entire body, which were all obvious proof that even a blind person could tell—the legendary mage who had once been invincible had not only returned, but her energy was so abundant that it was as if she had just gnawed at a huge, nutritious dragon.

A huge, nutritious... the grand mages all associated this with something in their minds.

The grey dwarf was exceptionally lively today, and gave a lengthy report at thrice the usual speed. He also occasionally used vigorous body language to reinforce his words. This was because he was going to be met with opposition from basically all the grand mages today, and his will to fight for this was therefore exceptionally high.

Actually, the main content of his report was simple. He kept chattering for Sharon to give Steven a chance: while the warlock's actions to date had completely crossed the Deepblue's bottom line, the grey dwarf had another point of view.

He felt that there was no proof that Blood Parrot and her people had anything to do with Steven. Erin and Minnie were only somewhat involved in the matter of the assassination of Richard,

and with Blood Parrot and her people all dead there wasn't the testimony to convict Steven. Of course, there was enough evidence to indicate that the dragon warlock had done many things in the shadow targeting Richard, but this could be punished in a more gentle manner, such as with a 'reasonable' amount for a fine.

The grey dwarf kept emphasising that Steven was very talented, and those with talent should not be given up on so easily. Richard had yet to fully prove his talent as a runemaster, which was why the door in this path was still open to Steven.

All of the grand mages were shocked by the grey dwarf's vigour. However, besides volume, the grey dwarf's logic just could not stand. If Richard's prior achievements weren't proof of his talent, then what was? Blood Parrot had disappeared in Naya's territory, and Richard had been studying with the man. This meant there was an 80 or 90% chance of the Blade of Calamity having done it, so if any of the grand mages went to the scene they could basically piece together the events of that night. The records of the mage enforcers having been moved could not be wiped away, and they had obviously been ordered to keep silent. That could be taken care of with just a word from Her Excellency Sharon.

The grand mages were no fools. While they listened to the grey dwarf's speech full of loopholes and conflicts, most focused their attention on the legendary mage, though there was a small number of people who suspected he was doing this for his own gain.

Richard obviously was favoured by Sharon, and had had intimate relations with the legendary mage on the Day of Destiny. However, she seemed to have a very ambiguous stance here. Rather than reprimanding the grey dwarf for his over the top and clumsy performance, she even seemed to be encouraging him. What Steven had committed was not a small crime, because he had wanted Richard assassinated!

The strange situation told them there had to be some other secret here, so they all waited calmly for what was to come. When the

grey dwarf threw out his final suggestion, everyone came to a sudden realisation.

# Book 1, Chapter 41 - Subject

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The grey dwarf proposed a six month grace period for both Steven and Richard, after which the two would compete again in a subject of Sharon's choosing. Hopefully, both would use the extra time to improve on and refine their preparations, the outcome of the battle determining which of the two would eventually inherit Sharon's runecrafting expertise.

The grand mages all realised that Blackgold's proposal for a six month grace period was self-serving. In all honesty, this proposal would give him an extra half year of fees from Steven. Could it be that Her Excellency's finances had deteriorated to that extent? Yet, such doubts were immediately rebuffed. The legendary mage's finances were robust; it was only the Deepblue that was struggling to make ends meet.

For many materialistic people whose primary objective in life was to amass wealth, time was an extremely precious resource. This was especially true for time in a primary plane like Norland, so without a split second to spare in the legendary mage making decisions a delay was inconceivable. The subject of the competition was decided in that very meeting.

Both this decision and the topic of the competition were sent to the participants the same day, a copy sent to Minnie as well. Of course nobody harboured any hope for Minnie; the top hierarchy of the Deepblue had long since received news of Marquess Niall's defeat. The news had spread from the grand mages to the outer circle of disciples, and Richard was starting to be viewed in a new light. Before he'd just been a fellow with some talent who'd had the good fortune to win Her Excellency's affection. Now, with the explosive rise of the Archerons, nobody in high society would dare look down upon him. At the very most, they would only scoff behind his back about his upstart origins.

As day turned to night, explosive cheers burst forth from within

Steven's mansion. Clutching the documents with some disbelief, the dragon warlock read over them again and again to confirm that it wasn't a dream. For the first time, he felt Sharon had affection for him as well. Forget any penalties, the bloody conspiracy hadn't even been brought up once.

Just like that, the affair he was most concerned about passed. Since the top hierarchy of the Deepblue had agreed upon the result, the Archerons or even Richard himself would not pose a threat of retaliation. The thing giving him most jubilation was that the doors of runecrafting had been opened to him once more, giving him and Richard a fair fight.

Was that even fair? Steven didn't think so for a moment.

He was a seventeen-year-old dragon warlock over level 10, with the financial backing of his entire family. More important was that he had a true blue runemaster backing him, and while the competition was six months hence the subject had already been made known. Everything worked to encourage him to cheat! He could leave any manufacture of components and purchase of materials to his family, and the development and design of the rune itself to Saint Klaus. Six months would be enough for him to improve on any weaknesses and manufacture a proper magic rune!

Two metal cages were added to his residence. One was built to contain magical beasts, specifically a powerful winter wolf. The winter wolves of the north were two metres long, and this one was amongst the most ferocious of its kind. It had tough flesh alongside the natural ability to cast frostbite and ice arrows. Old, powerful wolves could even spout freezing breaths!

In the other cage were a few strong, stout, polar snow rabbits. This particular type of rabbit had snow-white fur that gave it excellent defence against the cold, and they bred extremely quickly. However, apart from being lightning fast on their feet, they did not have any real means of attack. Snow rabbits were a common beast in the north, amongst the most elementary of prey

on the food chain. They made up most of the winter wolves' diet.

This was Sharon's competition: craft a rune that would allow a snow rabbit to defeat a winter wolf. Although it seemed deceptively easy, it was not easy to resolve.

The winter wolf was far stronger in battle, and it didn't even fare too badly in terms of speed. The rabbit was weak and small in front of the wolf that could attack up to thirty metres away, and its frail body made it difficult to slot runes on it. The rabbit was literally hapless in the face of a winter wolf: this task was clearly not something an elementary runemaster could succeed at.

Yet, even the most difficult of problems had their solutions. If even Saint Klaus couldn't solve this, Steven believed Richard wouldn't be able to either. Moreover, the rules had been made very clear: if the snow rabbits of both parties failed to defeat the wolf the winner would be decided upon at discretion.

After a period of initial ecstasy, a calmer Steven began to seriously consider the topic assigned by the legendary mage. On the day of the competition, the winter wolves provided by the Deepblue would definitely have similar strengths, but the participants would choose their own rabbits. Like any beasts rabbits varied in size and strength, and because they needed to withstand a rune they would eventually undergo several rigorous rounds of selection to result in rabbits of different power. Six months would be enough time to breed two generations of completely new snow rabbits, and the accumulated knowledge of the Solams could easily produce beastly rabbits in that time. Steven was confident that he could definitely have a very surprising edge over Richard.

Even though breeding a beast with a new genetic make-up required heavy investment, that would not deter Steven at this juncture. Were he to win the battle, all his efforts would have paid off. Of course, the beasts in the two cages had been provided by the Deepblue free of cost for experimentation, but after that buying



more would definitely be a huge expense. It would be more feasible to catch his own.

When one was in desperate straits, even a slight mirage of hope would allow them to burst forth with the full extent of their capabilities. This was something Steven was experiencing right now; although he'd already accepted his loss in terms of talent, in the face of this new opportunity his family's status and finances forced some determination into his path as a runemaster.

A note about the latest developments had been sent back, along with a letter expressing Steven's resolve to devote himself to magic once again. It didn't take long for the magic communication array to light up, sending a leaf with a magic letterhead back over. This was written by the duke himself, concise and straight to the point. The Solam Family would henceforth wholly support Steven's endeavours for the competition, on the one request at the end that Steven wouldn't commit such a folly again.

Steven understood what that meant— Gaton's deeds had already spread through the mainland, and now the Archerons were no inferior to the Solams in status. If he did something foolish like try to assassinate Richard again, nobody would be able to save him.

And Steven was determined to beat Richard this time fair and square, with proper means. Sharon may favour the boy, but her taste... was a little strange. The dragon felt like since the legendary mage would let Richard in, he himself could have a chance in the future. He had absolute confidence in himself, so he would wait for such a day. However, one thing was that he would find it impossible to put on a manly front with her unless she was willing to contain her dragonslayer aura. However, it seemed quite improbable for such an aura to even be contained.

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Richard was crouching down in front of two metal cages in the basement of his residence, observing the snow rabbit and the

winter wolf. Sharon's decision had definitely thrown him off, even made him feel wronged and resentful initially, but once he got to solving the problem he slowly pushed those things to the back of his mind. He immersed himself into the world of runes.

Having already gone through the entire dictionary of elementary runes, he hadn't found any that could allow a snow rabbit to defeat the winter wolf. The wolf had a strong resistance to poisons, so even if it were to swallow one infected with a potent poison it would only feel some mild discomfort in its stomach with no serious repercussions.

Richard continually flipped through the thick pages, unable to find any usable rune even at grade 2. It wouldn't be until grade 3 that multiple attributes could be added, and only at the fifth grade could one stimulate the blood. An example of the latter was the holy equipment crafted by Saint Peter, able to strengthen all divine creatures.

Richard closed the book, taking his eyes off the dazzling names at the back to train his attention on the cages once more. He'd only crafted a half-finished rune at best so far, and even with his rate of progress he'd barely be able to make grade 1 runes in half a year, forget grades 2 or 3. However, Sharon would definitely not have given him an impossible challenge; it left Richard pondering.

There were endless possibilities in the world of runes, the existing runes but a small and insignificant part of the whole. All runemasters who left their own indelible marks on the world had one common characteristic—they were unique in their own ways, without imitating anyone else. This had made Richard grow pensive; since it was impossible to solve the problem with normal runes, he would need to think out of the box.

Innovation was an everlasting theme in the world of runes, and Richard's thoughts eventually gained some clarity. This was only a test from Sharon, to ascertain whether he possessed the one quality that would allow him to grow beyond even a saint

runemaster— innovation.

Becoming a saint runemaster could not be the end of his progress — the Deepblue Aria exceeded the scope of fifth grade runecrafting. Even if he was only a humble apprentice of Sharon's, Richard's pride motivated him to dedicate his entire life to fulfilling his promise to her. To him, this promise was second only to his mother's dying wish.

It would take a long time for the boy to realise that this sort of pride, radiating from his very soul, came from his Archeron blood.

# Book 1, Chapter 42 - Preparation

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Everyone felt the flow of time differently. Some would feel like it flew by like a white steed, while to others it was as slow as an earth elemental in its corresponding plane— a thousand Norland years for just a kiss, so slow it made one angry. Receiving the topic of the competition from Sharon, both Steven and Richard began to strive towards the target.

Actually, Richard did things as per normal, and there was not much of a change in his lifestyle and daily routine. Even his training in magic and meditation was not interrupted, with just a slight alteration to his schedule. A part of the time he normally spent on magic philosophy was now spent on runes.

Richard soon found himself heading in the wrong direction. Some of his classes in rune design were about analysing the classics of his predecessors and understanding their great designs. He had to turn back and flip through some fundamental theories, being startled to find that— regardless of how complex and astounding a rune was— at its core it came from an understanding of magic. This told him it wasn't spell formations he lacked knowledge of, instead a philosophy of magic that would be more useful in his creations.

In the meanwhile, he began to touch on creating and attaching rune slots. A rune could only display its uses after being fixed to the snow rabbit, and a full slot could be attached to the target and eventually become a part of its body like a tattoo. The step past this was to draw the rune directly on the target, completely integrating the rune with it in an unrivalled manner.

Besides this, creating a whole new rune meant the study of magic ingredients was essential. Finding out which ingredients could produce the corresponding results was not as simple as it looked. Even the same magical being could have different reactions to magic based on which part of the skin was used. There were also

up to a hundred ways of hide tanning, and that could produce thirty to forty magic hides with various magic properties. The decorations and materials for runes numbered over a thousand, and with the processing midway and at the end, as well as the unique methods that every grandmaster-level runemaster would have, there was an unimaginably large number of combinations.

Richard explored this vast maze of knowledge, studying and practicing the fundamental techniques required for creating runes. He was very patient, not the least bit anxious as he moved forward step by step. At the most, he would review the effects of his learning in the past a few days before, and then adjust his schedule slightly.

To be honest, there were numerous shortcuts that could be taken in terms of procuring magic ingredients. For instance, he could have requested aid from the family. The Archerons were a model example of a family with recent success, and they could supply Richard with materials and processed items that were definitely ten times or even more stronger than the ones he made himself. Steven's intricate blazing earth dragon hide was a first-rate material, but it was something the Archerons could give as well.

However, Richard would rather use ordinary magic beast hide that was 1500 times cheaper than take one from Gaton. Even though he clearly knew the importance of using high-grade magic ingredients in completing quality runes, he stubbornly disregarded this little convenience and searched a way for himself to move forward.

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Steven was busy in a whole other way. He would exchange letters with Saint Klaus practically everyday, discussing about the runes needed for the snow rabbit. He also began to delve deeper into an understanding of these runes.

Sharon's theme was also difficult for Saint Klaus. Of course, the

difficulty was in Steven's limited technique in drawing runes. Saint Klaus not only had to find the solution to this, but also had to ensure that this was something that Steven could accomplish now.

A few days after the topic was set, this runemaster who had been famous for decades created ten or so feasible rune blueprints, but after evaluating them he found that none of them could be drawn by Steven. Hence, while Saint Klaus thought up new methods, he urged Steven to practice more in this area, and gave him ten or so practice session in drawing parts of magic formations. While there had yet to be a way to solve the issue, he had a general idea. These ten or so parts of magic formations would be of some use in the future.

The consumption of a long-distance dispatch spell formation, especially one that spanned over an exceptionally long distance of five thousand kilometres, was immense. However, in comparison to the first batch of specially-created magic ingredients that the Solam Family had scheduled to be sent to Deepblue, the few thousand gold coins from a dispatch was nothing much.

Duke Solam gave Steven a million gold coins in advance so that he could buy materials within the Deepblue. The modification and nurture of the snow rabbits would be a tremendous expense, and with a limit of half a year the cost would greatly increase. It would take over three million coins to develop a powerful magical beast that was still a snow rabbit.

In actuality, the reason why the items in the Deepblue were tenfold or more expensive than in the outside world was because the quality of items here was far superior. In Duke Solam's eyes, the prices in the Deepblue were still reasonable. While the Deepblue was becoming increasingly prosperous every year, there was a limit to their products and based on their contracts they would only supply items to the Sacred Alliance. Any remainder would then be released to the mass market. In the world outside, the Deepblue's items were usually high-grade goods that could not

be bought easily even when one had enough money to do so. As the Solam Family's young generation was the legendary mage's direct apprentice, they had somewhat joined ranks with the Deepblue's clientele. Duke Solam and his allied family had deemed it beneficial just from this point alone.

In less than a month after the money was sent to Steven, the aid of the Solam Family that came in supplies reached Deepblue. Along with the arrival of the magic supplies was an additional two million gold coins, because the Deepblue's midsummer festival that came once every four years was fast approaching.

The midsummer festival wasn't something traditionally celebrated on the continent, instead a large-scale magic material auction within the Deepblue. It had been held thrice before, and this was the fourth. Each of the three auctions had been increasingly sensational, with the third even attracting the interest and participation of even the largest families of the Sacred Alliance. It was said that many bigshots of the three empires had been sent to take part this time.

The midsummer festival was definitely no ordinary auction. While the format was about the same, the Deepblue and the suppliers it had invited would supply the main goods, while those who participated would also bring their own materials and request an exchange. Most of the time, gold was not the main way of settling the bill. Precious and rare materials were usually exchanged with items. The fundamental reason why the Deepblue's midsummer festival was not ordinary was actually because it was a lavish occasion once every four years. Even the legendary mage herself would open her personal warehouse and select some materials to be auctioned off publicly.

Anything that was hoarded by the legendary mage was definitely not a commonplace item. Due to her unique tastes, there was a large number of things related to dragons in her personal collection. As long as it had to do with dragons, any material was

great. For the true old aristocracy and powerful beings in the continent, gold was nothing, and these top-grade materials were items one could only hope to even see and not obtain. How could anyone miss this opportunity to use gold to obtain first-rate materials?



# Book 1, Chapter 43 - Sunk Cost

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Not just anybody could get a hold of dragon materials. Even a new legendary being would have to be quite cautious dealing with one, and such an act would leave them constantly on guard against the dragons' vengeance.

Still there was a fair number of people in Norland capable of killing dragons, but few also had a passion for collecting treasure. This was why the midsummer festival had grown popular, its scale far surpassing that of the large auctions of the three human empires. The supply of top-grade materials available at it far surpassed the others in both quality and quantity.

Blackgold had long since busied himself on this front. The festival this year would be three times larger than the last one based just on the invitations the Deepblue had sent out directly. The difficulty and complexity of the preparations had increased more than tenfold.

The Deepblue's main tower and even the borders needed to be cleared out to make space for the aristocrats on their way. Many caravans, servants, warriors, and mercenaries would be relegated to the villages nearby, and the dwarf had already commissioned over ten thousand slaves and a thousand artisans to build three new towns they could rent out. Once the midsummer festival was done, these new towns could house new immigrants.

The Deepblue was bustling with life, and the function of the harbour began to show itself. The south knew of the products and prosperity of the north, so even before peak season huge fleets almost filled the entire harbour up one by one. The farsighted dwarf had already begun expansion works, making use of the festival to let the aristocracy see the value of the produce in the north. Top-grade materials were a brand in itself, and large supplies of basic items would make good profit. This was a flood of gold coins!

The moment the Deepblue's power surpassed a certain point, the ambitious grey dwarf was going to consider expansion into the northern continent. Indeed, the northern continent was ruled by the mighty and merciless grey dwarves and beastmen, but the grey dwarves too were known for being able to be bribed. Blackgold was prepared to use his unique status and progressively invade the grey dwarf tribes. His final target was to buy the Stormhammer tribe!

However, while the blueprint was grand, the most important work to do was make inventory of the items that the legendary mage was preparing to toss out and auction off. Blackgold had to categorise them and appraise their value so that he could determine the starting price for the auction. Then, he would hand it to the artist who would make the catalogue for the auction. There was not much time left.

All sorts of strange and unfathomable items were piled into a room that was over a hundred square metres in area, forming a heap nearly ten metres tall. Buried underneath these miscellaneous items, there was actually a complete set of bones! If any necromancer was to see this, they would go crazy over this. However, the grey dwarf had a different attitude towards it. In front of this huge pile of treasure that he had to gaze up at, he found that he was extremely small. Clearing and categorising them was definitely not going to be easy.

Blackgold was the one with the least helpers amongst the grand mages, to the point that once he'd arranged for everything else he didn't have one extra person with him. As he began labelling a meteorite, he began considering getting another helper for the first time. However, at the thought of the gold coins he would have to pay out of his own pocket for that, the grey dwarf resolutely shook his head and put more effort into work.

The legendary mage's choice of auction items had been very simple. She just wanted to dump everything that was either about to expire, had an unknown function, looked annoying, or just took

up too much space. Her own trove had evolved with time, and with the increasing number of items an increasing number of precious resources such as materials from rare animals grew in number. Another asset was minerals not native to Norland, as well as magic crystals which were a currency of the powerful. The number of precious items had grown to the point that they needed to be cleared out; the semi-plane serving as the legendary mage's warehouse wasn't all that big, and there would eventually come a day when it was filled up.

The set of dragon bones, for example, had been Sharon's most precious treasure twenty years ago. Now, it had turned into trash that was using up precious space.

From the items auctioned away at the midsummer auction that happened once every four years, people could trace and deduce the general strength and wealth of the legendary mage. As the items became more abundant and rare, the Deepblue gave the arrogant powerful beings of the continent a clear message that the legendary mage's strength was still quickly rising. Hence, after every midsummer festival, the Deepblue would welcome four years of increased prosperity.

The midsummer festival was truly a large event for the Deepblue. It was a chance to soar, able to make dreams come true as one could exhibit their abilities. Most aristocrats used the event to expand their networks, while ordinary people got a rare chance to make contact with those in power. This was a chance for them to achieve their dreams. The midsummer festival was also a time for a flood of alcohol, and a time when many young girls were dragged to bed, willingly or unwillingly.

In actuality, the Deepblue had begun making preparations for the midsummer festival three months ago. However, for Richard and Steven, this had been deemed pointless. Normally Richard progressed at a speed that would stifle anyone, while Steven was suffering as he balanced strengthening his body and striking his

opponent. However, now that he was using the strategy of utilising gold to widen the path in front of him, Steven began to value the midsummer festival for the first time. If he could get a few top-grade magic materials from the legendary mage's personal auction items, that would have a decisive effect on the results of the competition.

While Steven currently lacked the technique and could not use quite a few methods that Saint Klaus had come up with, the concept of the design was still of value. If he could find specific precious materials and use natural qualities to make up for the technical aspects, he would be effective.

If he obtained an ice dragon tooth, for instance, the snow rabbit would gain a large increase in its cold resistance. It would also give it the ability to use frostbite and icicle blasts. On the other hand, a fire dragon hide would give it total immunity to the cold, rendering the winter wolf's innate spells useless. The crystal core of an abyssal rot-consuming monster would allow the rabbit to spray out corrosive acid that would leave even polar mammoths with several deep holes in their bodies, forget a measly winter wolf.

Another property of rare materials was that they could lower the difficulty of runecrafting greatly. For example, if the fire dragon hide was a hundred percent resistant to cold, the snow rabbit would only need a rune that would impart about 10% resistance to become completely immune, the rest taken care of by the hide itself. In other words, since the material itself was powerful, the effects of just a small amount would be able to meet Saint Klaus' requirements. That could also lower the difficulty to doable levels. Steven had already heard from Blackgold that amongst the items to be dumped from the legendary mage's personal cache was a large number of dragon materials.

This was actually a cheap trick, a very wasteful method. However, since the Solam Family had already invested tens of

millions of gold coins to nurture a runemaster, they did not mind adding in two or three million more. If not, the amount they had invested would become pointless. The grey dwarf had zeroed in on this, which was why he had incited the legendary mage to re-pick her runemaster apprentice in a competition that would take place half a year later. In order to obtain this placement, the Solam Family would definitely continuously pour money into the Deepblue.

The situation had developed just as the grey dwarf had expected. That was why, during one of the internal meetings, the grey dwarf had proudly introduced the results to date, and also invented a term just for the tens of millions of gold coins that the Solam Family had invested previously: the sunk cost. In the grey dwarf's point of view this was like a huge warship sunk deep inside the Floe Bay; although it having sunk meant all previous investment had come to naught, it would still be able to drag more ships to the bottom. Sunk cost was what made many people walk further and further down the path of ruin.

The grand mages expressed their shock with a lack of words. Who knew that Blackgold had actually come up with such a theory to gain gold unscrupulously through conspiracies? They couldn't help but change their view of the dwarf. Although they'd worked together for over a decade, their deep-rooted prejudices against his race had never been diluted. Although the Deepblue flourished immediately upon his appointment as financial officer, they all just thought this was due to Sharon's strength and not his skills.

In the past decade, the grey dwarf had been doing all he could to change this view of him, to show them that a finance officer didn't just do the accounts.

The upper class people had their politics, the middle class had their stresses, while those at the bottom only needed to do what was expected of them, and they did not even need to do it well. If they could not even meet the requirements, then they had two

choices. One was to fall to the bottommost layer of the social hierarchy, and the other was to mess up the hierarchy by breaking the rules. With violence, they could overthrow what had been the upper class, sending them to the bottom and obtaining their power.

This was the law of the jungle, how things worked anywhere, be it the Deepblue, the Sacred Alliance, or anywhere else in Norland.

To some extent, even if Richard qualified to be a personal apprentice of Sharon herself he needed to rely on her for study materials. He was definitely in the lower strata. Steven, continuously obtaining the aid of his family was in the middle class of this hierarchy. When these individuals of different levels met on the eve of the midsummer festival, they obviously didn't feel good about it.

# Book 1, Chapter 44 - Conflict

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Richard hated it when people blocked his way; it reminded him of Papin.

Even if Papin's moronity was a feat in itself, he'd still managed to interrupt the first anniversary of his mother's death. The blow it had dealt was far worse than anything Steven had ever done, even if Richard was just as eager to get rid of Steven because of the events with Erin.

Truth be told, Richard thought nothing of the assassination attempt. He knew fully well that he would need to get on the battlefield at some point, and when compared to the conquests of planes this mere assassination wouldn't even be considered child's play. The only thing he'd retained was Naya's brutal interrogation of Blood Parrot. He still had no idea whether the Blade of Calamity had gleaned any information or he didn't care and just wanted to prepare him for the blood he'd see in the future.

And yet, despite Richard not liking his path being blocked, it was blocked all the same. And the person ahead was the one he least wanted to see— Steven.

The dragon warlock still had on a graceful smile, reaching a hand out to Richard with flawless elegance in his posture, "Long time no see, Richard. Are you here for a catalogue of the auction as well?"

Richard looked at Steven's face and then the proffered hand, having no plans to shake it as he spoke bluntly, "What do my actions have to do with you? The only way your smile will grow wider is if you never see me again."

Steven's smile immediately froze, astonishment and fury appearing on the faces of his attendants. Nobody would have thought that Richard would not give him any face. At the very least, such unreasonable words and actions were not fitting of someone who was a noble. Solam and Archeron were both now

large noble families with power, even if Gatton was the only person with such power on the Archeron side.

This was one of the primary paths to the midsummer festival, so it was bustling with activity. Since it was so close to the festival already, there were more foreigners here. Perhaps it was because of a lack of wealth and status, but they hadn't entered the Deepblue itself yet. They had still come to stroll around, however, perusing the market prices and broadening their horizons. From the borders to the lower floors of the main tower were stalls for travelers; even if these weren't items from the Deepblue itself they couldn't be lacking in quality given where they were sold.

A crowd began to gather as tensions almost erupted. However, this was in line with Steven's plans; he wanted to provoke Richard and humiliate him in public, even if that would be of no assistance in winning the competition. Hence, Steven immediately curbed his fury and retracted his hand calmly, continuing to speak in a poised manner, "I finally understood why the Archerons could rise so quickly. Not just anyone can complete a path that other families spend thousands of years working on in just a few decades."

The onlookers immediately chuckled quietly. The reputation of the Archerons had spread throughout the Sacred Alliance with their sudden rise, the news making its way to the other two empires as well.

Richard remained stoic in the face of the provocation, however, unagitated as he gazed straight into Steven's eyes, "The Archerons are hypocritical to their true opponents by custom."

Steven immediately turned pale, while his subordinates could no longer hold it in. A warrior took a step forward, hand on the hilt of the sword at his waist as he shouted in fury, "You dare humiliate the Solam Family? How gutsy!"

Richard didn't even glance at the warrior and continued to look straight into Steven's eyes, "I thought the previous events had



made you a little smarter, but who knew you'd continue to be as foolish as before. Is the pressure so immense that you couldn't sleep if you didn't see my reaction?"

"Haha, I have no idea of what you're talking about!" Steven burst into laughter, but he obviously looked unnatural.

Richard's counter was like an attack from an assassin, unexpected but fatal. This was something that Steven, who was used to the method of refined ways of the upper-class who hid their intentions, found difficult to adapt to. Every word from Richard hit right where it hurt, and did not leave any leeway.

The bystanders quietened down, waiting to watch the show.

"If you don't know who Blood Parrot is either, then watch your dog lest it run around and create a ruckus. I'm not the one who'll be embarrassed." Watching Steven's face that had suddenly gone steely, Richard did not ease up, "Besides, I really have no idea where your courage and self-confidence comes from. It seems like Solam and Archeron just fought a war. I wonder what the results are?"

"That's Alice Archeron, not Gaton!" Steven snickered.

"Indeed," Richard nodded.

The watching crowd burst into collective laughter, and only then did Steven realise what he had said. If it had been Gaton, then the allied armies of Solam and Niall would long since have been destroyed. The fight wouldn't have drawn out so long.

Of course, the other nobles of the Sacred Tree Empire wouldn't have just watched as Gaton strolled up into the battle. A small bandit like Alice was just a gust of wind to them, but someone of that sort of power would be an invader. Politics was very complicated.

Ignoring that, however, the results had been quite simple. It was an ironclad fact that a second tier viscount of the Archeron Family

had brutally destroyed an army made of Marquess Niall's entire forces and soldiers from Duke Solam.

The laughter that nobody held back made Steven more keenly aware that this was not Solam's territory, and not everyone would give Duke Solam face. At least, those who dared laugh were definitely not afraid of the Solam Family. What made this worse was that a fair number were laughing.

Steven barely suppressed the fury surging in his heart, and actually had no idea of what to say in that moment. He was well-acquainted with the rules of battles between true aristocrats, and he could grasp timings well. However, Richard completely disregarded the laws and said whatever he wished, each word condemning him and revealing the filthiest and darkest secrets casually. Was he not afraid of being laughed at?

That was what made him depressed. The Archerons had long since been labelled upstarts, and their reputations couldn't get any worse. However, the Solam Family had had eight centuries worth of history, significant even if they couldn't be considered ancient. Steven would not win in slinging insults; he didn't want to lower his standards to the level of one of those lunatics. Besides, the most recent war had Solam on the losing end, and his title of being the most powerful weapon and threat in this war had become empty.

Everyone knew that it was best not to threaten the Archerons with war. They were a bunch of maniacs, and if they would respond to that threat. Marquess Niall was a prime example of that.

Going by the unspoken rules of the age of his family, Steven should have left with magnanimity and pride at this point. Nobles were different from commoners; they resolved conflicts through battles on the field and in court. Bravery and power— those were the domains of nobles, and any humiliation if he left now would only be superficial.

However, Steven was not even eighteen yet. He couldn't hold it in, asking, "I heard you and that girl called Erin have something going on. That was a praiseworthy decision, she's pretty good."

Richard's eyes flashed and then dimmed down, before he regained clarity and calmness in his gaze. He nodded with composure, "I agree with what you said, but what I'm worried about isn't that. How are you preparing to clean up after yourself if you lose the competition?"

Steven's eyelid twitched, and he then laughed calmly, "If? Sounds as if there's really an 'if'..."

Without waiting for Steven to finish speaking, Richard interrupted him, "There may be people more talented than me at runecrafting, but you definitely aren't among them. Think carefully about what you're going to do if you lose."

Steven was left with nothing to say. This was a truth even he couldn't deny—the only hopes he himself had for the competition was a large amount of resources, his family's strength, and possible favouritism from Sharon. However, Richard's words had made him think about the circumstances he had not dared even think about. What would happen the moment he lost? The Solam Family's total investment in him was nearing twenty million gold coins, and even his mother and Marquess Niall combined couldn't shoulder the burden if he lost.

Now, he was confronted with a nightmarish possibility. What if the Archerons were supporting Richard? What if Sharon was biased towards him instead? That evaluation of 'tender and delicious' was a trauma weighing down on him, refusing to dissipate.

Besides, the battle of rune knights in Niall's lands had shown that the Archeron runemasters far surpassed Saint Klaus, at least in battle might. Although Klaus called himself a saint, he wasn't even near the ranks of a great runemaster yet. There was at least one in

the Archeron Family.

This thought told Steven his chances of winning weren't as high as he'd assumed. Although there were still a few months until the competition, and he had some time, this time used up so many resources that it created a downward spiral. The more he didn't want to lose, the greater his investment... He suddenly felt like half a year was far too much time.

After seeing Steven's expression, Richard chuckled and continued on the route he had planned out. The dragon warlock walked to the side and gave way; continuing to create a ruckus would only insult his own family. He'd seen some familiar faces amongst the onlookers, people he'd seen before on all sorts of reports that were true bigshots.

Richard's words were like a barbaric punch that broke magnificent tinted glass, revealing the true cruelty of the world to him. Steven had been doing all he could to avoid this matter, there was no good thinking about unbearable consequences since that would only disturb him and hinder his progress, but now the darned kid had made him feel uneasy. It made him furious.

Richard halted his steps as he passed the warrior, looking up to examine his face. The warrior suddenly felt like the boy had turned into an unsheathed dagger, so sharp it made him uneasy. It was as if he'd gotten too close to a deadly beast. He subconsciously took a step back, and slightly unsheathed his blade.

Richard currently had mixed feelings. Given Eruption and Precision he had at least five methods of hurting the warrior greatly in such close quarters. This was actually an issue; it made him fear that he really would act if his violent bloodline erupted one day. He wasn't skilled enough to do such a thing with ease, so the moment he acted he would find it difficult to save the situation.

However, Richard still had control himself, which was why he

acted as if he had not seen the blade and continued gazing at the man, speaking calmly, “A dog is a dog. Even if my face is right here for you, you wouldn’t have the guts to hit it.”

The warrior immediately turned red, turning towards Steven. The warlock’s features twisted as well, his breathing turning coarse. Still he just shook his head with resolution, causing the warrior to push his blade back into its scabbard even as his face turned redder. He watched Richard leave, pace quick but even.

The bystanders broke out into discussion. While they weren’t loud, they completely disregarded Steven and his people. They hadn’t lowered their voices, so the content of the conversations would leave nobody from the Solam Family happy. However, the warrior had lost the courage to pull out his sword. Not considering whether there were tyrants of the continent here who could fight with Solam himself, there were still many who could kill him with one blow. He recognised the emblems of the Archeron Family and its allies nearby; the only reason they hadn’t acted yet was Sharon, not Solam.

Steven did not say a word, leaving with his entourage with a wave of his arm. He didn’t even bother getting a catalogue for the auction.

After they got to a quiet place with no people, the warrior finally could not help but ask, “Young Master, why didn’t you let me kill him? Just put all the blame on me when the time comes!”

Steven looked grim and did not answer, while the cleric snickered, “Immature! Did you think that if you were to act, you’d be able to take on all the responsibility? With how the Archeron Family works, they’ll declare war on Solam regardless of the reason, even if Young Master gives them your head.”

Steven sighed and looked at the warrior, “All those with the Archeron name are lunatics. Stop provoking him. This is the Deepblue, not our territory. You’ve been with me for so many

years, and I don't want you to get into trouble.”

The dragon warlock looked gloomy as he walked towards his residence. The warrior was the last to move, and he watched the traces of ridicule and gloom that flashed in the cleric's eyes.

# Book 1, Chapter 45A - Mountainsea

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With that little episode done, it was almost time for the midsummer festival. The atmosphere both inside and outside the Deepblue grew extremely lively, with many people dressing in exaggerated bright clothing unique to their races. Some even had colourful wigs on, while others had drawn strange patterns on their faces. Large barrels of fine liquor made it to the Deepblue through horse carriage, but they emptied out at an astonishing rate. The Deepblue had been lit up once more, countless flames decorating the night skies into a diverse, dreamy world. There was bonfire, song, and the aroma of food everywhere; on this day, no worries existed in the world.

In the upper layers of the Deepblue's main tower, the true bigwigs remained extremely clear-headed. This was where the true auction was to be held, the legendary mage's personal collection revealed here in detail. It was a stunningly huge event, because the sheer amount of rare materials the legendary mage could bring out was far in excess of the last festival. It led the aristocrats to have a whole new understanding of Sharon's strength.

The most striking detail was definitely the set of dragon bones placed at the centre of the hall. A few mages kept hovering around it, the way they drooled over it obviously exposing their identities. However, the most precious thing here wasn't the dragon bones, but the heart of an ancient beast from the Wild Plains, half of the fingernail of an archdevil of the abyss, as well as the complete soft neckhide of a fire dragon, all arranged at the highest place. All were rare items that were estimated to have a value of millions of gold coins.

The rules for the auction were very simple. There was a card in front of each auction item, and people who wanted to buy them would write the price they were willing to pay and their identities there. If someone was going to bid higher, they would continue

writing on the row above. This went on until the auction was over and nobody offered a higher price. Of course, if someone was in particular need of any item and could not wait for the auction to end, they could quote a price to the whole audience. If nobody fought for it, then this item would belong to the person. While the auction hall reached an astoundingly large area of 13 000 square metres, a mere rank 10 warrior could have his voice heard throughout the area. Even if the aristocrats that entered this auction lacked this amount of power, they definitely had hundreds and thousands of rank 10 warriors under them.

Those with territory weren't as interested in magic materials like the bone and hide. They instead paid attention to the ores placed at the west of the hall in a four-tiered annular stand. To the practical nobles who forged their own equipment, the bones and hide were far less useful than tens or hundreds of kilograms of rare ore. The former could make for one or two precious tools, but with the latter they would be able to craft armour, heavy weapons, and magic arrows. Equipping them on suitable warriors would immediately bolster their armies.

Those with power were actually quite repulsed by individual might, but were extremely fond of creating large-scaled armies.

Large amounts of ores like this obviously could not be piled up in the exhibition hall, which was why there were only a few samples placed there. The Deepblue had always had a good reputation when it came to delivering goods be it in the auction or daily sales, so the shipments would have the same quality as these samples. The nobles gathered in front of the counter, studying the grade and the colour of the ore. Families with good relations would even whisper to each other while eyeing the representatives of families who were not their allies from the corner of their eyes. They would carefully read the captions of the items. Besides the quality, quantity was also one of the most important points. After careful calculation and rethinking, they would then carefully write each



price.

The atmosphere in the hall was heated yet controlled. It was still far from dawn, and there were only undercurrents flowing right now. It was not yet time for anyone to make a loss yet. However, the quantity and quality of the auction items that had surpassed the expectations of everyone had seemed to ignite the gunpowder. The ores' variety and quantity had been a lot greater than expected, and people could not help but wonder how many planes with rich mineral resources the legendary mage had occupied in the past few years.

Steven was not dazzled by the ample items on display in the hall. He maintained his elegant demeanor, exchanging conventional greetings with the representatives of a few allied families before he walked towards the exhibition area of dragon items with utmost confidence. Besides the warrior and cleric, following behind him were two appraisal experts that Duke Solam had sent over, as well as two high-ranked warriors above rank 16; there were hardly any saints here, those near rank 18.

Through pleasant conversation with Blackgold's assistant over time, Steven had long since come up with a goal he had to meet. He needed that hide of the fire dragon!

Indeed, the legendary fire dragon, not a red dragon. It was no easy task to kill any dragon, but red dragons were considered above average amongst the chromatic dragons with the most powerful bodies. The fire dragons were technically a branch of the red dragons, but there were few of them. Each of them was very powerful, however— if a red dragon over a thousand years of age grew exceedingly powerful, it could evolve into a fire dragon by chance.

In terms of human power, a newly advanced legend like Solam would place his life in jeopardy to fight a mature fire dragon. The small group of rune knights Saint Klaus commanded would be wiped out right away, so it was near impossible for the Solam

Family to use its own strength to obtain the complete neckhide of a fire dragon. Saint Klaus had once formulated a rune for the competition based on the fire dragon's hide, but even if it had the best effects it was also the first to be denied.

Steven stood by the card for a long time, seriously studying the caption full of little words and a few illustrations and not letting any word escape his attention. Just by gauging it visually, it appeared that the skin was better than before and much larger than regular Fire Dragons, and it was excellent and intact. This fire dragon was over a thousand years old, which meant the quality of its hide was far beyond that of a small red dragon that had lived a mere few centuries.

The caption on the card was lengthy, the first paragraph speaking of the valiance with which the legendary mage had battled the fire dragon. This sort of content was normally skipped, but multiple revisions by a historian, artist, and Blackgold had ensured that anyone trying to deduce Sharon's abilities through this would definitely regret it.

The second paragraph was a lot more important, detailing the powers of the dragon itself. The Deepblue's reputation ensured that these descriptions were accurate, just like the last paragraph that touched on the dragon's habitat.

There were already two rows of tiny words on the auction records. The prices quoted were 1,000,000 and 1,050,000 coins respectively. The inscriptions with the names implied that these two had to be incredibly powerful—no matter how powerful an individual was, it was difficult for them to match up to noble families like the Solams without the support of an organisation in power or wealth. Of course, Sharon was an exception.

After listening to the appraisal specialists carefully, Steven tried to retain a calm look on his expression, but the corner of his eye could not help but twitch slightly. The skin on the neck of the fire dragon was far too important to him. With it Saint Klaus could

create a powerful rank 2 rune, and the snow rabbit defeating the winter wolf wouldn't be consigned to mere legend.

Seeing this skin, Steven felt like he could see the gates that led all the way to becoming a dragonblooded runemaster!

He muttered to himself and asked for a magic pen from his subordinates, preparing to write his first amount. After some deep thought, Steven chose to set the price at 1.3 million, and then add 200 thousand to it later. This would show strength and determination without being too much of a show off, just in case others saw through his anxiety and purposely participated in an attempt to raise the price further.

At this moment, the hall that was becoming more noisy suddenly went quiet, and practically all those over rank 18 turned back at the same time, gazing towards the entrance of the hall. An invisible but blazing gust surged into the hall and filled the hall in an instant. The temperature in the hall abruptly rose by quite a few degrees, and the air that had been warm and moist became dry and blazing-hot. A sombre aura of desolation filled the air, and many even heard the faint roars of beasts in their ears.

This was an extension of pure power. The change to the hall was slight, but the sheer range of it was huge while it had happened in an instant. The thought of the power this being possessed was terrifying in itself. However, while this aura had come fiercely, there was no killing intent or pressure. This meant the person hadn't done this intentionally— this was just a byproduct of his power.

# Book 1, Chapter 45B - Mountainsea

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Many of the powerful beings in the hall instantly made their own assessments of that invisible force, coming to a conclusion that made nobody happy. A line of people entered the hall in that moment, the most eye-catching of them all being the young girl at the centre escorted by a group of people. Her robes indicated that she was a martial artist, styled strangely with all sorts of wild bestial patterns. Her clothing was only strange, not specifically luxurious in terms of materials or accessories, but her very presence managed to gather the attention of everyone in the room in a moment, as if she was a true king amongst beasts.

The girl was well-proportioned and thin, and although her slightly tanned skin was not exquisite it seemed to be glowing. Her waist-length hair was nearly black, draping loosely over her shoulders in seven or eight little plaits with bones, pearls, beast teeth and all sorts of other accessories holding up the ends.

This was a more physical beauty, mixed with a primordial desolation and aggression that was difficult to put into words. The two white lines drawn on the left side of her face radiated an unforgettable barbaric aura, like boundless old plains and hills. Even a commoner would be able to sense the sheer power held within, and it caused the faces of those who were truly powerful to warp. They could tell it was no simple adornment, but they could not discern whether it was a rune or one of the saint totems spread in the wilder parts of the continent. Whatever it was, the girl was no ordinary person.

The girl had a graceful posture, but her stride definitely wasn't light. It felt like the hall shook with every step she took, like it wasn't a girl walking in but an ancient beast weighing hundreds of tons! Such might definitely didn't come from the servants behind her—the rhythm of the tremors lined up with the girl's steps.

At this moment, all the nobles in the hall had strange expressions

on their faces. Some were angered by her disregard for everyone else, while others were just fascinated by her. However, as their gazes began to change, they suddenly felt a sting in their eyes. Their visions blurred, and tears flowed. Their personal servants wanted to attack, but the powerful ones stopped them.

Just then, a petite and wrinkled old man entered amongst the servants covered by her powerful presence. His arrival seemed to break through a fog, entering the view of everyone present. The man had a pair of muddy amber eyes, looking so old he practically couldn't walk. He was dressed in strange and luxurious mage robes, with bright feathers stuck on his head. There were at least ten necklaces made of different materials layered on his neck that was like a withered branch, making one worry it would break under the weight.

The old man had a wooden staff in his hand made out of three branches, made obvious by the unevenness where cloth and beast hide were used to connect them. A coiled venomous snake was carved at the top, with beast teeth and bones hanging down from it in a string.

The old man followed closely behind the girl. No matter how fast or slow she walked, he seemed to remain in tune. He was tottering like he would fall and die at any moment, but that did not happen. Originally he had no presence to speak of, only registering to a select few people, but now he'd intruded into their sights and pushed the image of the girl out of mind. Anyone who wanted to focus on the girl, her face, her waist, her chest, and her butt now only saw the man's withered face and blackish-yellow teeth.

In that moment, tens of people could not hold themselves back and began to tear up or were startled, amongst which were included those with power. There was no lack of influential people amongst those present, but the period of chaos seemed to be so short that it did not exist. In just a few moments, people acted as if nothing had happened. Everyone went back to their places and

regathered at the stand of the auction items, doing whatever they had to. This was the Deepblue and not their territory, and the power that the old man had displayed made it clear to them that the girl was someone they had no right to provoke. All of them smiled and backed down because of this little issue, planning to make sense of the situation before doing anything more.

The fools who would rush out roaring at these times would long since have turned into mincemeat decades ago, and they wouldn't have made it into the Deepblue's auction long enough to cause a disturbance.

To be honest, this did not attract everyone's attention. There was still a fair number of people single-mindedly studying the quality and strategising on the pricing for the auction items. For people like them, that was the most important thing. Some of them were so focused that nothing could affect them, while others were so weak that they could not sense the deterrence from the gap in their strength.

Steven was amongst that second group. He was stood in front of the fire dragon hide, writing each digit vigorously with his pen. It seemed like none of the bigshots were interested in this yet, and those who wanted to compete were just people with individual power. The price was only 1.3 million right now, far from the limit of 3 million he was prepared to give up.

When Steven wrote the 3, he saw the faces of those who'd already quoted their prices change from the corner of his eyes. He smiled slightly as he wrote the first of the zeroes, planning to write them all as round as he could. There wasn't any hurry anyway.

However, before he could finish the fourth zero, he suddenly sensed a hot gust of air filled with a great aura of desolation blow by his side. A graceful figure appeared in his sight, and before he could even react he was sent flying through the air as if a mammoth had crashed straight into him. His vision whited out, and all he heard was the roars of the wind and wild beasts.

Next came an intense crash. The great pain of the impact woke Steven up from his near confusion, while his subordinates all hastened over in a flurry to help him up. The cleric had already instantly cast an intermediate heal on Steven's head, allowing the dragon warlock to somewhat see in front of himself clearly.

However, he almost coughed up blood at what he saw. A young girl walked to the exhibition counter in front and pulled the dragonhide right off, shaking it powerfully and rubbing it a few times before saying contentedly, "It's not bad, the texture is very soft! I just happened to bring one less item of clothing." She then placed the dragon skin around her shoulders and even looked to the sides, as if this was a luxurious shawl.

An extremely sturdy warrior behind her stooped down and reminded the girl by her ear, "Your Highness, the money."

The girl suddenly realised this and patted her head, and then said apologetically, "Oh, my, I'd have forgotten if you didn't remind me! The Norlanders prize money the most, so I need to take note. Thank you, Steelrock. Who hosts this auction?"

The girl raised her volume for her last sentence. In actuality, there was no need for that, because the grey dwarf had already hastened over at lightning-speed the moment the girl's hands were on the skin, and he was waiting at the side. With Blackgold's keen sense of smell from years of hammering and refining, he was stunned to find that the girl's aura was the most powerful he'd ever seen in his life. It was even more powerful than Sharon's! The concentrated smell of gold— no, a smell that surpassed gold, had the grey dwarf's blood boiling and left him unable to control himself.

Seeing the grey dwarf that had charged towards her, the girl grabbed a rock the size of a fist from the animal skin bag at her waist and, without even a glance at it, tossed it to the grey dwarf and said, "This is the... money for the dragon skin."

The rock was grey and unremarkable, but when tossed in the air it lit up with many silver speckles. It left many streaks of silver in the skies, like the threads of a spiderweb.

In that moment, the grey dwarf's entire body went stiff as he reached out to catch the rock. His expression of nervousness, caution, and solemnity was the same as when he was doing the report forms for the total finances of the Deepblue at the end of every month. However, the muscles on his arms were all jerking, his posture so stiff that he was like a gem underground. When the grey rock reached his palm, his fingers actually refused to listen to him, missing and letting the rock bounce straight to the ground. The grey dwarf cried out miserably and he fell hard to the ground like a rock, and then used all his strength and stretched out. Finally, he was able to grab the rock firmly before it fell to the ground.

At this point, tens of dazzling silver spiderwebs filled the skies, clearly showing the traces of the trajectory of the grey rock.

Tens of people had changed their expression, while the grey dwarf that had slowly gotten up spoke in a trembling voice, "It's beyslace... a spider crystal. It really is a spider crystal!"

The item that the grey dwarf was holding was one of the necessary materials to make rank 4 runes. It could be sold in any part of the continent for five or six million coins, and just the sheer quantity and length of the lines made it obvious that this was a higher-quality crystal worth nearly ten million! The feeling of holding ten million gold coins in his hand was enough for the grey dwarf to feel waves of dizziness. Not every grey dwarf would have the chance to be hit by ten million gold coins in their lifetime.

In that moment, numerous gazes fixed on the bag at the girl's waist. Everyone could see that this was spatial equipment, but it was hard to tell how much it could contain inside it. Even an ordinary leather bag containing beyslace would be enough to leave anyone suffocated, but this was actually spatial equipment!



Steven had actually reached out towards the dragon skin on the girl's shoulders and shouted in a hoarse voice, "That dragonhide is..." But when she tossed the spider crystal out, the word mine immediately caught in his throat. His mouth opened and closed, then opened again, but he couldn't make any sound at all. Even if he were to sell dragonblood he wouldn't be able to get a bit of powdered beyslace. It was a whole other level of contest, and this wasn't something he had the qualifications to participate in. If he wanted to raise an objection, the only reason he could have was that he had been sent flying by the girl.

The girl seemed to remember something at that point and frowned, before turning to ask the barbarian warrior, "Steelrock, did I knock into something just now?"

Steelrock bent his gigantic body that was nearly three metres tall, beaming in answer, "Just a tiny thing in your way."

He looked up and stared at Steven and his servants, and then said disdainfully, "Just a bunch of people who aren't all that rich. There's no need to worry about them; you're a student of Her Excellency."

At this point, Steelrock looked around and raised his voice, speaking every syllable of a magic phrase clearly, "Who's paying for herself!"

# Book 1, Chapter 46 - Mountainsea

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There was a huge uproar in the hall as everyone broke into discussion, no longer needing to hide their curiosity.

Flames burned in the depths of Steelrock's eyes, a clear sign that he was a saint. Against a level 19, possibly level 20 warrior, nobody here was confident of their chances in a battle. The two warriors Duke Solam had sent to guard Steven didn't even dare make eye contact with the man; in a real battle, both of them would likely fall to a few punches from him.

However, Steelrock wasn't the hot topic of the conversation. It was no news that Sharon had auctioned off a spot for a paying student to the Millennial Empire, but the elites of the continent knew that Empress Gelan's granddaughter was the one who got it in the end.

The Millennial Empire's heritage could actually be traced back to the elves. The imperial family had elven blood in it, so the empire too was known for its arts, magic, and excellent martial techniques that allowed them to gain fame worldwide. Nobody expected Empress Gelan's granddaughter to actually be a barbarian girl, with barbarian bodyguards by her side. This was far too large a difference. They only realised that she was the girl in strange attire once Steelrock made the announcement. That meant the troop following her was made up of elite guards of the Millennial Empire!

Once the young lady's identity was known, people started to change their perspective of her. Despite the dissatisfaction some elites had displayed earlier on, as of this moment, all of them appeared dignified. They remained humble, with a tinge of pride that was not too overpowering. They totally exemplified the behaviour of aristocrats. The title of being the Millennial Empress's granddaughter had already overwhelmed everyone that was present.

Steven's mouth moved again, wanting to say he was a paying student as well, but he wasn't stupid enough to actually do such a thing. The term self-supporting was tagged with different connotations based on the one that used it—it gave the young lady an imposing stature, but it made him sound like a joke.

Steelrock clearly hadn't finished expressing himself, wanting to say more. His eyes scanned around the room as he made grabbing gestures with his hands, evidently showing that he wanted to pick a fight and loosen his muscles up a bit. However, the young lady raised her hands all of a sudden, having him go quiet immediately. The gesture quietened the entire hall down in the blink of an eye.

The young lady shut her eyes and raised her head, her small but bridged nose twitching continuously as though she smell something in the air. The elder behind her awoke from a slumber, scanning the hall before resuming his repose.

The young lady slapped Steelrock's arm with great strength, saying, "That smell! Did you smell that?"

Steelrock took a deep breath, the air howling into his chest, but his expressionless face implied that he didn't smell anything. The young lady closed her eyes once again, starting to follow the intangible smell in the air. Around ten other barbarian soldiers followed after her, not making any noise as they moved. These soldiers' movements followed the rhythm of a tribal dance, but with a few humans marching alongside them the sheer difference in stature made the whole thing comical.

Yet, nobody in the hall laughed. Teasing these few level 18 guards of the Millennial Empire is not a wise thing to do.

The young lady acted as though there was nobody around, walking past the elites and ignoring their looks of curiosity, disappointment, and expectation. Yet everyone before her scrambled to make way for her. Those who were slower or are not quick to adapt would be sent off like Steven was just now. The

young lady would hit the obstacles blocking her away without hesitation, whether they were there on purpose or no.

The small body of the girl contained an absurd amount of power. She was practically a primordial behemoth, easily throwing a couple of level 12 warriors a few metres away in one slap. Nobody dared to block her path to the source of the smell.

In a nondescript corner of the hall, Richard was standing before a piece of monitor lizard hide, pen and paper in hand as he calculated something. This piece of hide was worth 120,000 coins, and was of relatively good quality that could be used as a medium for an elementary rune.

However, the hide was so large that a complete rune would take up less than 10% of it. A hundred and twenty thousand was far too expensive for someone who didn't want to take a single coin from Gaton, and Richard would not be able to afford the loss. He was thus calculating a way to maximise his usage of the skin, such as using it to make other goods that he could sell to earn back some of the cost.

The lizard's skin was irregularly shaped, indicating that the person who'd skinned it wasn't very professional at the time. Parts of the edge had grown uneven even if the skin itself was whole, and some of the steps of processing the hide would be extremely quirky, making the final shape even stranger. However, Richard needed a uniform piece of skin to make the rune. Hence, the separation process was also a relatively profound problem. On one hand he had to make sure that the best part of the skin was used for the rune, while on the other he had to ensure that the remaining products wouldn't be too shabby. As he continued calculating the best course of action, the magic paper was already filling up and cramping with numbers.

To be honest, this hide didn't qualify for the auction. Nobody knew how it had made its way into the legendary mage's hands, either. In fact, Blackgold had wanted to get rid of it once, but he

gave up on that thought on the principle of even mosquitoes being meat. He wanted to see if auctioning it off could increase its value.

The description of this hide wasn't as detailed as those of high-grade products, except for its dimensions and material. Its origin could only be marked unknown.

The grey dwarf suspected that this creature ran into Her Excellency when she was hunting. It wasn't her target in the first place, but coincidentally it could be used. However it was not worthy of investigation, so he used a useless term like 'unknown' for its origin.

Despite all this, to Richard who had limited money and materials, this skin was like a gift of coal in the snow. Absorbed in his numbers, he turned oblivious to his surroundings. In any case, this area of the exhibition hall was near the stores, and not many people would be interested in something that wasn't special. He could finish his calculations peacefully.

However, Richard did not realise that he became the centre of attraction all of a sudden. Being watched by so thousands of people was like being stared down by a huge dragon, however. He broke out in a cold sweat and regained his awareness of the surroundings, instinctively raising his head to look across the hall.

A uniquely dressed young lady was rushing towards him! Her raised head revealed that both her eyes were closed, and she only used her nose to sniff the air continuously. Following behind her were about ten other guards that seemed to be barbarians, with a few soldiers in fancy armour alongside them. From Richard's perspective, their light footsteps made them look like they were preparing to steal something, but his instincts warned him of danger. There were motives behind those comical movements, because even with a whole suit of armour, they were able to move quietly without making a sound.

On one hand was the attention from everyone in the hall and on

the other hand was the group of strange people marching towards him. Richard became nervous suddenly. He looked to his left, no one. To his right, nobody there either. However, he was clearly in the young lady's way. Since no one was beside him, then the young lady's target might be behind him, But behind him...

Richard came to a sudden realisation, turning to look at the lizard skin hung behind him. He then looked at the barbarians behind the young lady who were glaring at him, as if he had insulted their goddess, or as if they had a great hatred against him.

# Book 1, Chapter 47 - Mountainsea

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The guards from the barbarian tribe were all very skilled. They stared daggers at Richard, making him feel like dozens of swords continually pierced through his body. The immense stress left him unable to catch his breath, bursting out in cold sweat. No matter how slow-witted he was he would've understood not to mess with these guards, but he was clearly in the young lady's way.

As Richard started to break out into a cold sweat, the young lady's nose fidgeted more and her footsteps sped up. She was in front of him in a split second. As Richard moved two steps to his left, the young lady turned right at the same time, increasing her pace. It was as if she was already jogging.

The moment the young lady picked up her pace, Richard's mind became a mess, the scenery in front of him changed drastically and the graceful and pretty young lady disappeared all of a sudden. She was replaced by a behemoth pouncing towards him, and at that point a single thought flooded his mind— if he didn't dodge in time, he'd be crushed to pieces. The creature wouldn't even realised that it had stepped on something!

At a point of life and death, Richard subconsciously burst forth with his innate power, using pure strength from the tip of his heel to move himself. Without even shaking his upper body he'd managed to move five metres to the right. This monstrous method of movement was clearly a battle technique from the underworld— once one avoided the enemy's strike, they would follow up with a thunderous counter.

Richard was garbed in mage attire from head to toe, but he displayed the strength of a powerful soldier and exquisite techniques from the underworld. The sudden movement shocked everyone, especially those who knew his identity prior. Steven, who'd been standing in the same spot the whole time, suddenly broke out into a cold sweat. He finally realised that it was actually

very dangerous to stand close to Richard.

In the blink of an eye, the group of warriors behind the young woman unsheathed their weapons and positioned themselves like they were planning an attack. However, nobody actually struck forth, nor did anyone make a single noise! Even having witnessed Richard's ability, they seemed confident in being able to kill him before he even attacked.

At that moment, a strange ambience permeated the hall. Be it the unsheathing of the weapons or Richard's movements, nobody had made a sound. There wasn't even a rustle of clothing, the only movements being the graceful young lady's footsteps.

However, the girl was caught off guard in the air, falling down. She gasped in surprise, but she kept her eyes closed as she straightened her legs to gently step onto the floor. Her body then changed directions, chasing after Richard like a lightning bolt. Even if Richard was using Eruption she was still twice as fast as him.

A web of cracks spread around her foot, penetrating a few metres into the solid lazurite floor. Richard felt a wind blowing his way from her, unable to breathe at all. He wouldn't be surprised to be broken into pieces if the both of them were to collide. He quickly considered between a counterattack and a dodge, deciding to dodge even though he knew that he wouldn't be able to get away in time.

Right at that moment, he lost his focus. He couldn't help but look towards the barbarians, where the old man opened his eyes. That pair of eyes was everything in his vision all of a sudden, but the illusion passed in a split second.

However, Richard realised that both his feet seemed to be pinned to the ground. They couldn't move an inch, while the young lady was still charging towards him at an unbelievable speed. The surprising part was that her eyes were still closed! Richard's eyes rolled up, and he waited for the last hit in despair. He doubted



whether that thick stone wall behind him could stop him from being rocketed out of the hall.

However, the collision he was expecting did not happen. The young lady stopped right in front of Richard, the tips of their noses less than ten centimetres apart. He was clueless as to how she managed to stop that much momentum so suddenly.

The young lady's eyes were still closed, but her small nose kept twitching. Her tiny face started to show an engrossed expression as she moved closer to him. Richard wouldn't be more scared even if a fierce tiger was sniffing like this, and cold sweat continually trickled down his forehead, but his legs were still fixed. The best he could do was try and move his upper body back, but the girl kept her hands at her back and tiptoed constantly towards him. By the end of it all, his body was 45 degrees to the ground, completely mismatched with what he knew about the world. Indeed, when faced with elites, general knowledge often failed.

Richard had already bent backwards to the extreme, but the young lady continued to bend over, their noses eventually touching. She finally opened her eyes, revealing two bottomless pits as vast as the stars.

There was strength within that space. Richard felt his very soul sucked in by those two pitch black dots, freezing and unable to move a single step. Even if he wanted to move, he wouldn't even be able to lift a finger. He already felt numb throughout his body, as if he was being locked down by more than ten assassins. If not for some mysterious power having shunned the murderous intent, he may not even have been able to bend backwards earlier. He'd already realised that power came from the elder, and if that elder stopped he'd grow numb once more.

Just as Richard was attracted by the girl's pupils, she was looking at him as well. Her small nose continued to twitch non stop, and she suddenly beamed with joy like a scene of a thousand mountains and rivers had appeared in front of Richard. She then

stuck out her tongue... and firmly licked Richard's lips. She then straightened up, her eyes already smiling with satisfaction.

Richard was traumatised, and found it difficult to straighten his body. Eruption had been cancelled out when he'd made eye contact with the old man, so right now he had to rely on his own physical strength to support himself. If he continued to endure this position, he suspected he'd likely fracture his lower back.

The young lady's scent still lingered on his lips. It was difficult to describe, not sweet but cold and distant. It was as bold as ten thousand mountains, making it difficult for him to differentiate it from her overpowering aura.

Yet the young woman was ignorant of Richard's feelings. She just squinted her eyes as she revelled in the taste, "Mmm, such a rich smell of sulfur, and burning lava... what, there was supposed to be a strange smell of a few abyssal devils, where did it go? Mmm, such a sweet and familiar smell, is this..... the smell of an elf? The smells mixed so well together, no wonder it's so nice!"

The young girl had mumbled this in an ancient barbarian language, so not everybody in the hall could understand her words. The aged man opened his eyes again, throwing a deliberate glance at Richard.

The young lady shuddered all of a sudden, regaining her senses. That incomparably arrogant aura was donned once more, and she pointed at Richard. "You, accompany me for 3 months! I like your smell, this money is for you!" she said, her tone leaving no room for question.

She pulled out some beyslace spider crystals from her pocket at the same time, forcing about five or six into Richard's hands without letting him say a word.

Richard immediately felt the stares on him intensify, the daggerlike glares increasing tenfold. These were spider crystals, and there was a bunch of them! However, the people in this hall

were wise. Even if they glowered in Richard's way, there were no looks of greed towards the pouch at the girl's waist, not even a quick glimpse.

Perhaps Richard was still unfamiliar with most precious and uncommon goods, but he'd surely heard of beyslace crystals; after all, he was a budding runemaster and they were materials used in high-end runes. He obviously knew the value of this bunch of crystals, and that this was a sum of money he probably wouldn't be able to earn in his whole life. Ordinary elites could basically forget about this term; without reaching the legendary realm it would be impossible for them to get a hold of such things.

Richard shook his head and returned the bunch of crystals back into the girl's hands. "Sorry, I can't accept these. I won't be able to accompany you for three months, either."

The girl was shocked by this. "Why? I thought you people from the mainland would do anything for money. Did I not give enough money? It's just three months!"

Honestly, Richard felt a little hesitant and uncertain when he handed back that huge sum of money. After all, it was a shocking amount of wealth. But once the crystals were handed back, he felt extremely relieved. He smiled at the girl, saying, "I'm not short on money. I have many things lined up for me, so I can't accompany you."

"Not short of money?" The young lady looked at Richard and then the lizard's skin, confusion written all over her face, "Then why are you spending so much time calculating here? Isn't this priced in gold? Gold isn't even worth anything! Ah, or are you interested in monitor lizards and want to become a lizard man? You don't need to take that trouble, nagas already exist. There are even draconians, who are much stronger. You don't have to sacrifice yourself!"

The young lady's words almost made Richard collapse. He said

helplessly, “Alright, I don’t have much money. Still, I can live with what I have, so I don’t need your money.”

“Ah! I understand now, are you saying that I offered you too little? Then you can have all this!” The young woman actually took out the pouch made of hide from her waist.

More than half the people in the hall were sent to the verge of insanity at that moment. She actually took off that pouch? Didn’t she know that it was spatial equipment?

“No!” Richard was starting to feel frustrated. The solution he’d almost arrived at was starting to fade away from his mind. He didn’t want that, and he couldn’t let this piece of skin go to waste.

“How about a month?” the girl asked with clenched teeth.

“I’m not free for a single day!” Richard rejected her firmly.

Her face gradually turned murderous, but that didn’t scare Richard. He lifted the magic paper that had fallen to the ground, continuing his calculations. The quill moved rapidly across the paper— outside of the lizard skin, the most precious thing to him right now was time.

Richard’s actions were a little rude, but the young lady smiled all of a sudden. She turned around and ran towards the old man, shouting in their tribe’s language, “This person doesn’t want money!”

The elderly man opened his turbid eyes and nodded. The girl cheered, ran to Richard, and grabbed him by the collar, lifting him up till he was one centimetre away from her face. She then shouted, “You! You have a nice scent and don’t want money! I’ve decided, you’ll be my man!”

This time around, the shock was not small. Both of them were similar in height, so Richard felt like he’d hit that continuously moving mouth if he moved even a bit. However, the girl had tremendous strength, and after eruption he’d lost all his own.

Caught in her hands, he couldn't even move an inch. There was no result to his struggles, and Richard was sure that nobody would help him out of this situation. He could only force a smile and say to the young lady, "That is not a good idea."

The young woman instantly groaned and said, "What's not good about it? I'll throw anyone who has a problem with it into the sea! Last time, my father brought a troop of soldiers to attack our tribe's territory and was eventually defeated by my mother. He then became my mother's man and that was how I came about. Since you cannot win against me, then you should follow me! Don't worry, I won't bully you immediately. We have to live together for at least one to two years for me to know if you are annoying, in case you take advantage of me and I cannot train up skillful warriors. If I find out that your strength is only in your fragrance, I'll throw you into the sea too!"

Richard was left speechless after the young woman's declaration. The elder coughed all of a sudden, and Steelrock stepped forward and whispered to the girl in their language. She frowned and glanced at the elder, and then inspected Richard. She asked, "What is your name?"

"Richard. Richard Archeron." Richard replied impatiently. He suddenly realised that there was an increasing number of times that he needed to use his family name to break away from awkward situations.

"Archeron... never heard of it, are they famous?" the young woman turned around and asked. Steelrock immediately took out a book made of sheepskin, flipping through the pages. He then pointed to a line on one of the last few, shouting out, "They are very poor!"

The leader of the guards whispered to Steelrock, though, and he added, "But they are able in fights. They are true warriors!"

The young woman gently released Richard onto the ground and

adjusted his shirt. She then took a few steps back and looked at Richard seriously, saying, “Very good, I like real warriors. You may be weak, but you’re brave, not greedy, and have a nice scent. I still want you to be my man.”

“This...” Richard forced a smile again, he was ready to reject tactfully, but the girl interrupted, saying, “But I have decided to follow the rules of the mainland. My father said, when two people want to get together, they have to become friends first.”

Steelrock moved forward again, trying hard to lower his voice, “Your Highness! The rules on the mainland are that when two people get together, their families have to discuss deals first.”

“Ah, is it like that?” The young lady was astonished, and looked towards the elder helplessly. The old man took a lot of effort to open his eyes once again. He looked at Richard, and then showed an ugly smile and said slowly, “Rules are set by people. In this piece of land, Your Highness can decide what is reasonable. At least, nobody will object here.”

The young lady obviously wanted to make it short. She instantly said, “Alright, let’s be friends then! This is what my father said. Although he cannot defeat my mother, my mother once said he is a wise man.”

The girl fixed her gaze on Richard’s eyes, her right hand clenched into a fist in front of her chest as she asked seriously, “Richard, are you willing to befriend me?”

This was another scene that Richard did not expect, but he could feel that the girl was serious and persistent. The young lady’s straightforward disposition actually matched his own preferences, so he replied seriously as well, “I’m more than willing to be friends. But—”

“Just friends will do,” the girl interrupted him again. “We’ll talk about you wanting to be my man next time. I won’t force it since we’re friends.” Her expression grew divine and solemn, “Since we

are friends now, I need to let you know my name. My true name is Jessamine Beshaba Tor Terrathemus...”

Steelrock’s expression had changed drastically the moment the first few syllables were spoken. He wanted to walk over and stop her, but the elder shook his head so he stepped back after some hesitation. The old man gently knocked his cane against the ground, the sound of the impact spreading across the hall to make the girl’s words indiscernible. The crashes continued until the name was completed. Everyone knew what he was trying to do, but didn’t say anything out loud about it.

The young lady’s name was extraordinarily long, taking a whole minute to finish. To Richard it sounded like a long string of syllables pieced together, and were it not for his great memory and his gift of wisdom he wouldn’t have been able to remember it the first time around.

“Did you memorise it?” she asked with expectation.

“Yes.” Richard nodded. This astounded the girl, but then she said with elation, “Great! That was the only time I’ll say it!”

However, Richard’s worry was now how he was going to address someone with such a long name.

The young woman guessed what Richard was thinking and said with a smile, “The people in the tribe call me ‘Mountainsea’, you can call me that too.”

“Mountainsea?” Richard was curious of the reason for such a strange name. Even ignoring her exotic dress and personality, she was astonishingly beautiful by the standards of the mainland. Her name, however, seemed vast and powerful, unlike those used normally to describe girls.

Surprisingly, Mountainsea nodded firmly and said, “Yes, it’s what the elders said. I have a mountain of wealth right now, and my future strength will be as deep and unmeasurable as the sea.”

“Alright then. We’re friends now, Mountainsea!” Richard said.

The girl gave a cunning smile all of a sudden, “Then I have a present for you. Have this!” Thus, before a stunned and dumbfounded Steven, the girl took off the dragonhide she’d just bought and pushed it into Richard’s hands.

Richard frowned instantly in rejection, “No! This is far too precious!”

“No, you will have to give me a present too.” The young lady was very serious.

“Of course, but I don’t have something so expensive. You should take this—” Before he could even complete his sentence Mountainsea reached out her hand and pulled him over. She then kissed him on the lips, separating with a smile, “That will do!”

Richard froze up. To everyone else it looked like the young lady had given him an intimate kiss, but he knew that she actually just bit and licked at his lips. The girl then reminisced in satisfaction, commenting, “So sweet!”

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The midsummer festival finally ended, leaving the people with enough to talk about for another four years. That night, Blackgold’s feelings for the girl rose shockingly, to the level of adoration. Both smelled of money to him, but evidently spider crystals far surpassed gold as a unit of transaction.

And yet, that wild night, Steven may or may not have been the most disappointed one. Nobody wanted to talk about the dragon warlock who was thrown away by accident, instead focused on many other topics— the young lady’s leather pouch, Richard and Mountainsea becoming ‘friends’, even Steelrock, that elder, and the Millennial Empire’s elite guards. Across these topics, beyslace spider crystals and self-supporting students were repeated portions. Who would spare the time to care for a small dragon



warlock? Even if he was mentioned a few times, Steven was only referred to as the guy who got hit out.

Only he himself was clear that the pressure from Mountainsea wasn't limited to that impact. Nay, it was crushing him...

# Book 1, Chapter 48 - Friends

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The night of the midsummer festival was a night branded deeply into Richard's mind. All the way till he returned to his residence, he'd been in constant disbelief over what had just happened. Everything was unbelievable, however despite this, the fire dragon's hide on his neck was very real.

This item that was worth nearly ten million coins had been crunched up into a bundle by Mountainsea, and had been handed over to him as a gift. Richard opened it up and laid it over a huge worktable, caressing it gently.

Spread out, the dark red hide which had bright patterns threaded throughout it was nearly two square metres in size, taking up most of the table. Despite the magic lamp that emitted a light as bright as sunlight, the faint red luster which the hide emitted could still be seen, wafting off from the its surface like mist. When Richard stroked the hide, he could feel a boiling heat from the tip of his fingers.

A large amount of data surged out as Richard's hands came in contact with the hide, allowing him to grow familiar with its properties. This was the most precious material that he had ever touched in his life, and if he were to use this hide as a material for his rune, many of his plans could become reality. With its help, he was at least 30% sure that he could make a rune powerful enough that it would allow the snow rabbit to win over the winter wolf. However, at least to Richard the origin of this skin remained a mystery.

Honestly, Richard was very willing to befriend Mountainsea, although becoming her man was another story. For now, however, he still was unsure of her true intentions.

His heart told him the barbarian girl was simple and sincere. On the other hand, the wisdom and logic he'd formed after many

years warned that there must have been some kind of conspiracy behind her actions.

Richard had his own principles and thoughts. Although he wanted to become friends with Mountainsea, he wasn't going to use any of that vast wealth of hers. His mother had moulded his ethics when he was young, and the shadow of Gaton Archeron loomed over him in the present.

Before sending him to the Deepblue, Gaton had once said something that was deeply imprinted within his mind, "Every Archeron has a burning arrogance inside them. Rather than asking for help from others, they would rather use their own two hands to break new ground. Of course, this comes with pros and cons. The cons are that the Archerons will forever find it difficult to band together. However, the pros are that every successful Archeron will be feared by others."

Silvermoon elves were obviously proud as well, but it came with detachment and arrogance. The pursuance of perfection which came from their very blood made it difficult for them to see anything else.

These two different kinds of pride mixed into one within Richard, and he himself had no idea whether he was more like the silvermoon elves or the Archerons.

He rolled up the hide once more and set out to seal the magic material. Unless he kept it in a semi-plane, if the hide was not sealed and stored with magic, the magical force within it would gradually dissipate. At this moment, however, Richard found that there was a slight power flowing around the dragonhide, which he immediately linked to the barbarian girl through its desolate aura. She hadn't added any forces to the hide when she'd used it as a shawl, only doing so when she gifted it to Richard to ensure that the magic inside wouldn't dissipate. Who knew that someone who charged around everywhere without regard could be so attentive?

Richard subconsciously flashed a small smile. He then cautiously placed it on the top rack of the magic material warehouse.

That afternoon, his schedule was filled with classes. However time flew by, and soon enough it was lunchtime. Richard saw lunch and dinner everyday as a battle. Although his diet was no longer modulated by the legendary mage herself, it was still being modified every now and then by the best alchemist of the Deepblue. The similarity between the two was that the ingredients used were equally expensive, and the portions equally astounding, which was why two strong, tanned slaves were now needed to bring him his meals.

Returning to the residence, Richard was surprised to see Mountainsea waiting for him at his door. Behind her were only Steelrock, the old man, and two court guards. After bringing the girl and her people inside, Richard's lunch was also sent over by two tanned slaves.

After the food was arranged properly, the girl immediately made a squeal of enjoyment and sat by the table, "Treat me to a meal! Treat me to a meal!"

"Of course!" Richard replied, wanting to be friends with her. He also called out to Steelrock and the old man, but was tactfully rejected by the barbarian warriors. The gigantic Steelrock seemed to treat everyone with disdain, but it looked like he had a good attitude towards Richard.

After being invited to eat, Mountainsea did not hesitate. She immediately made her move, using her hands and not bothering with the ten kinds of exquisite cutlery available on the table. Whether it was the dragon ribs or the turtle shell, all were easily torn into pieces and tossed into her mouth, which she swallowed after chewing and crunching. Even the boiling-hot soup and its ingredients were all poured into her mouth. No matter what was inside, they were all swallowed in a gulp. Her teeth seemed to be able to crush all substances in the world, and the dragon bone and

turtle shell appeared to her as mere crispy kernels or nuts.

The old man expressed his desire to see the residence of a legendary mage's disciple, and Richard happily allowed them to move around as they wished. All the information he had here was on the basics of magic and was no secret in the Norland continent. He returned to the table after taking care of the old man and Steelrock, only to freeze upon seeing that Mountainsea had finished everything.

He'd only spoken a few words during that time...

Mountainsea looked at the empty plates, and even she felt a little sorry, "Ah, while this place isn't all that good in other areas, the food is not bad!"

The girl stood up and pulled at Richard, saying, "How about you come to my camp? My people went to the sea to fish last night. If you go now, you can eat sharks and even devil whales!"

"You don't stay in the Deepblue?" Richard was rather curious.

"Of course not! What's good about this place? You can only see the mountains and seas outside through such a tiny window. I like being able to see the sky right after I wake up. Floe Bay is actually very magnificent and almost measures up to my hometown. Why do you hole yourself up in such a tiny cage?"

Richard found this funny, though he could not say much after seeing Mountainsea looking so sincere. Forget winter, even at the beginning of spring or late in autumn people freeze to death here, he'd wanted to say, but from the looks of it the girl had no idea about what cold was.

Richard could only refuse her invitation, "No, I have to meet Master this afternoon."

Mountainsea made a sound of surprise and suddenly remembered, stating, "I have an appointment with her this afternoon too— I'd almost forgot about that. Actually, it doesn't

matter whether I see her, but since you're going, let's go together!"

Though there was still some time before the appointment, Richard had no plans to get food elsewhere. He could only use the internal communications system and ask the people who sent meals over to bring a few light refreshments when they came to clean up. He then found a place with a wide view by the large French window and began to chat with Mountainsea.

The girl talked about the glory of the barbarian world. From her narrations, Richard learnt that they lived on a huge island at the east of Norland called the Desolate Continent. This was because in terms of surface area, it could already be considered a continent. The native tribes that lived there called this continent Klandor, the Land of the New Heroes.

Richard also mentioned the great life he'd had in Rooseland. Although it was the life of people who lived at the very bottom in the continent, Mountainsea listened on with keen interest.

At this point, Steelrock and the old man had completed touring Richard's residence once.

Steelrock's gaze swept through the various magic materials and books, even secretly taking a thick and dull 'Planar Geometry' book from the bookshelf and flipping through it. There were many notes wedged inside, in which Richard had written his thoughts. Every note only had one or two lines, but there were a fair number of them accumulated throughout the book. Steelrock placed the book back and used his fingers that were as thick as a steel pillar and lightly grasped a book on magic theory. After flipping through it, he found a similar set of notes and nodded, before pushing it back on the bookshelf. Compared to normal humans, Steelrock was basically a giant, but his current movements were surprisingly agile, not leaving behind a single trace.

The old man stood in front of Richard's work table, bending over as he looked carefully at one of Richard's incomplete ideas for a

rune. The large parchment paper spread on the table was filled with countless numbers and formulas, as well as two rough drawings of parts of a magic formula. The final structure was yet to be completed, and there was still some calculations and validating formulas to be done. An incomplete concept like this was something no runemaster would be interested in taking another look at. Yet, the old man stood still in front of the table, as if he had a great interest in these dull numbers.

Steelrock headed to the old man's side and glanced at the table. Obviously unimpressed by the numbers, he immediately began to frown. "This is a rune? It's far from our saint totems. This kid is diligent, frugal, and disciplined, but he's quite poor. This rune seems incomplete. Look, there's a fatal flaw here in this formula."

The old man shook his head, "Whether an eagle can soar into the blue skies is obvious from the moment it flaps its wings from its nest."

Steelrock rubbed his gigantic palms together, "This kid will be an eagle in the future?"

The old man did not answer, and instead said, "It's time to meet Her Excellency, Sharon."

# Book 1, Chapter 49 - Meeting

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On the other side of the residence, Richard and Mountainsea were getting increasingly engrossed in their conversation. She was enthusiastically recounting glorious hunts in recent years, where she'd captured mammoths alone in the cold.

It was at this point that Richard realised something was amiss. "Hold on," he asked in disbelief, "You're a warrior?"

Her reply indicated she'd expected this, "Of course! The elders even say I could be the heir to all totemic warriors in the future!"

Richard grew slightly confused. "Then can you learn magic? I mean, won't there be clashes with your path that slow you down if you try to learn both at the same time?" He fumbled around for the right words to say, hoping not to hurt her pride.

"Why would I want to learn magic? It's so complicated and useless... Oh I'm sorry, I wasn't talking about you..." She stuck her tongue out in apology, but the gaze she had fixed on his lips was one of a glutton.

Richard immediately turned around, a subconscious reaction that told Mountainsea she'd exposed herself. She immediately sat upright, explaining with a straight face, "Magic really is of no use to me. I can destroy spells below grade 5 with a single slap already, and it's virtually impossible to lock me down with grade 6 spells either. Besides, I'm still young and inexperienced. When I get older I'll be able to avoid or block stronger and stronger spells."

Even though Richard already knew that Mountainsea's strength was formidable, he hadn't expected it to be so great. It looked like Klandor was no weaker than Norland.

"Alright then. If you're not planning to learn magic, why did you become an apprentice of Master?"

Twirling her finger around one of her braids, Mountainsea



answered as though it were common knowledge, “Because Her Excellency is a legendary mage. I just wanted to find someone of that level for a mentor, not her particularly. With her addition I’ll have three legendary mentors now, and my Mother and Grandma on top. The elders said it’s for background, something you Norlanders consider very important. Even if I don’t learn anything here, it’s worth spending some money to come to the Deepblue for the background. In your words, this is... this is... Steelrock!”

The small hill of a barbarian warrior jogged over, leaning down to Mountainsea’s ear with much difficulty. He tried to whisper softly, “It’s called gold plating.”

“Gold plating?” she asked in return, “Why gold? Isn’t it everywhere? Wouldn’t magic ironjade from the ninth abyss make for a better image?”

The barbarian warrior evidently hadn’t thought this through before. He rubbed his hands together awkwardly, trying to find a reasonable explanation for the thing, “Maybe gold is considered expensive and precious in Norland. Look, everything here is priced in gold.”

Mountainsea finally seemed to understand, “No wonder the elder said spider crystals and gold were two completely different things in Norland.”

“Exactly!” Steelrock exclaimed, impressed by the girl’s wisdom.

Even though Richard felt that something was amiss, he could not quite point it out. If Blackgold were here, he would have been able to criticise the barbarians’ ignorance with irrefutable evidence. The smaller units of currency weren’t the same as items of more value; spider crystals would never replace gold coins. Regardless, even Blackgold would have to admit that gold coins and spider crystals were in entirely different realms.

The time to meet the legendary mage arrived in a flash. Sharon was someone who always paid attention to punctuality; when it

came to others, of course. She herself had an ironic lack of the same, something very dragon-like. An hour or two of delay from sleep was quite common, and most of the grand mages were understanding of the situation. After all, the legendary mage couldn't possibly waste any time; even sleep was a good time for her mana to grow. She was the root of the Deepblue's foundation with her vast and profound abilities. In general, other people in unique situations who were there to meet the legendary mage wouldn't mind waiting for her for a couple of hours.

That afternoon, Richard and Mountainsea had both good and bad luck. On the good end, the mage was already up when they went to visit. On the other hand, she hadn't woken up on her own.

The legendary mage had scheduled the meeting with both Richard and Mountainsea in the same venue, a small reception hall. Less than two hundred square metres in size, it was one of the most modest halls in her private residence.

At the moment, the legendary mage had been lying on the wooden couch, her leg perched high on the armrest. Her left hand was extended across the seat, her fingers occasionally reaching for the fruits in the golden basket. As though moving on their own, the fruits landed in the legendary mage's mouth one by one, disappearing within. Her posture wasn't the least bit elegant, but with her porcelain arms and calves the visual impact was strong enough to ignore her lack of grace.

Sharon's eyes were half-open, but the shiny pupils lacked focus. Anyone who knew her would understand that this was a sign of her being half asleep, and this was exactly the time when she was at her most dangerous.

The sweet and melodious sound had been echoing throughout the reception hall for a while. Although it contained an awakening power, this was completely lost on the legendary mage. Her eyelids were drooping, as if she was going to continue her endless nap.

Just then, a strand of her hair suddenly stood up like it had a spirit of its own, looking around vigilantly. It started to tremble more violently, before jumping up straight and causing the mage much pain. She let out a cry before sitting up.

Her eyes thus fully opened, pupils blazing with fury. A colourful breath came spewing out of her tall nose bridge, containing unbreakable elemental energy. The elements in the air seemed to arouse in a split second, cheering as they danced towards the legendary mage. They formed a mysterious trail around her, seemingly prepared to obey her orders.

Sharon looked around for an enemy with an electrifying gaze, only to find not a soul in sight. All that was here was the snacks and fruits, no target needing destruction.

Sharon glanced at the constant ringing of the clock, seeing the strand of her hair fall down to rest. She suddenly started laughing, a few small knocks to the armrest of her couch setting off a dozen such clocks at the same time. This was a signal, summoning the grand mages of the Deepblue to an emergency meeting.

Seventeen grand mages filed in a moment later, a group of dark elves moving their respective chairs into position. Sharon drummed her nails, indicating to the attendant outside to bring the visitors into the hall.

Mountainsea pulled Richard into the hall affectionately, Steelrock, the elder, and two other palace guards following closely behind as well. Not all visitors were allowed to bring their attendants into the hall; this had only be done today by Sharon's orders.

The legendary mage's eyes instantly brightened as the line of visitors entered the hall. Her squinty eyes scanned past Steelrock, the elder, and the palace guards one by one. There was nothing peculiar about Steelrock and the guards at all, and although the elder's steps were a tad slowed he immediately kept pace with

Mountainsea.

The seventeen grand mages involuntarily straightened their bodies, undercurrents of mana flowing in the air. Their experience allowed them to see that the two guards were level 18, with Steelrock being even higher. In such close proximity, just those three would be able to kill them all if they didn't have their guards up. Moreover, there was still that elder at the side, who even they couldn't see through. On top of that, even if the girl looked young and delicate, she exuded a wild and desolate aura of toughness that made her seem like a young beast.

Since the legendary mage seldom called for emergency meetings, the grand mages knew that unexpected events must have occurred. Now that they saw the girl's wild entourage, everyone could sense the tense atmosphere. What bewildered the mages was why the legendary mage did not bother to hide her hostility when Richard seemed to be so close to the barbarian girl. Those who were meticulous would have put two and two together to link her fury to the Day of Destiny.

Richard felt a strange and stifling atmosphere once he stepped into the hall, an omen of an impending thunderstorm. He raised his head to meet Sharon's piercing gaze, immediately being stumped for words. Sensing something wasn't right, he quietly pulled his hand backwards.

Much to his relief, Mountainsea released his hand and bowed politely to Sharon and the group of grand mages, before retreating to a corner. Her unexpected consideration took Richard by surprise. Given her immense strength, had she not wanted to let go he would have been unable to get away no matter how hard he struggled.

Mountainsea walked up to Sharon, and automatically took a seat in the large couch directly opposite her. Leaning backwards and finding a comfortable position, she was no less imposing than the legendary mage.

Sharon squinted her eyes, asking, “And you are?”

“You can call me Mountainsea, I’m the paying student. Are you my mentor?” the girl replied naturally, her imposing manner on equal footing with Sharon’s.

“My student?” The legendary mage laughed wryly. “Although I don’t really care about the aptitude of students who pay for themselves, you’re a barbarian warrior who’s the inheritor of the sacred totems. Why would you learn magic from me? If I recall correctly, the greatest power of your totems is the abolishment of magic.”

“Ah, I don’t have plans to learn magic from you at all. I came to the Deepblue because you were a legendary mage, so I could gold-plate!”

# Book 1, Chapter 50 - Collision Course

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Mountainsea didn't forget about 'gold-plating' the second time, treating the word casually. She'd remembered to be respectful to her new teacher, but didn't notice the legendary mage's face darken. Of course, even if she had noticed anything, she would've continued to speak.

Sharon laughed all of a sudden, her eyes crinkling into charming crescents as the haze dissipated. "Gold-plating? Just because I'm a legendary mage?"

Mountainsea nodded in reply, "Yes! You included, I'll have three legendary teachers to boost my background."

Sharon smiled elegantly in response, "Who are the other two?"

"One is the elder of my tribe, and the other is the Sword Saint of the Millennial Empire," Mountainsea answered with delight, tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ears and tilting her petite face. Nobody would have thought this girl from Klandor could exude such a ladylike aura.

Sharon let out a laugh, "You're saying you have connections to Empress Gelan of the Millennial Empire?"

"She's my grandmother."

Sharon's smile froze for an instant, but she returned to her normal self. She glared at Blackgold, but the grey dwarf only reciprocated with a look of innocence. The information about this new student had been handed down to Sharon long ago, but knowing the legendary mage she'd only read the numbers within and ignored everything else.

Sharon stretched her slender hand out and grabbed an aquatic fruit that was bigger than her hand. She flicked its shell off easily, revealing flawless flesh within. She peeled one petal off and popped it into her mouth, "I heard the Millennial Empire has the

bloodline of high-grade elves, how did they get a granddaughter like you? You came from the Klandor Continent not long ago... Oh right, the third prince of your empire, the youngest of your four best generals, Greyhawk, led a 50,000 man army on an expedition to Klandor decades ago, is it..."

"Oh. Not long after he landed on Klandor he led his army to battle with the brave warriors of my tribe at the Eaglefall Plains, but it didn't take long for my mother's totemic warriors to take him down and capture him. She only wanted to scare them, so she released all the men a few days later, but the prince ended up becoming my father."

A crunchy sound came from Sharon's mouth as she shattered the seeds of the fruit with her teeth. She remained expressionless as she swallowed, as if the fruit was seedless. Sometimes the legendary mage had equivalent bite force to a dragon.

"That's saying that your mother is a legendary being too. Four legendary beings behind your back, not bad at all."

Mountainsea nodded, "Yes, and with you it will be five. The elder said a background like that will make me formidable almost anywhere in Norland. I'll just need to mention it whenever I get into trouble and the enemy will retreat in fear. No fighting needed."

Sharon cackled and spoke in a weird voice, "Why is it that it feels like you're using four legendary beings to suppress me? That's why you're not giving me any respect. So, let's see, is any one of you standing behind her interested in fighting me?"

Beams of light shot out of Sharon's eyes, her blonde hair rising into the air. The light was so blinding that one couldn't see her face. Remaining seated, the legendary mage scanned the four people standing behind Mountainsea.

The two guards groaned as the force sent them flying ten metres away, as if an invisible hammer had struck them hard. They were

slammed into the wall, sliding down to the ground after the impact. Steelrock had to move a few steps back as well before he yelled and steadied himself, about to charge as he glared at Sharon with a bloody nose. Only the old man stood still, but that did not stop his hair flying backwards as if being blown by the wind. The two bone accessories that were hung on his neck exploded loudly, giving out a thin white smog.

A helpless smile surfaced on the face of the old man as he opened his eyes, dried lips moving like he wanted to say something. But his movements were as slow as ever, unlike the legendary mage who spoke so speedily. Before the old man even said anything, Sharon had already spoken a handful.

“Ha, finally exposed! Though we have not met before, the aura of the ancient beast cannot fool me. You woke me up from my nap! Shaman Urazadzu, is it? What are you doing here instead of staying in the shrine of the Vastdome River located in the Great Snow Mountains? It looks like you want a fight!” Sharon waved violently at the grand mages, “Get out! My beloved guests shouldn’t complain that I won because of numbers. Hey, old man, you’ve already been in the legendary realm for about fifty years now, don’t accuse me of taking advantage of you if you lose. And that big thing, you can join too! Those two useless ones won’t be able to stand for a while.”

The grand mages looked at each other, but no one moved. They finally understood why Sharon always called them over urgently whenever she met with guests. It was to show off her strength, and guarantee numbers if it came to a fight. The legendary mage was confident in the current match up, so she only needed them to be an audience.

Sharon finally stood up in the midst of the chaos and rubbed her hands together, excitement filling her eyes. “It’s been a while since I’ve had a good fight. I hear you barbarians prefer fighting over talking. I’m not in the best mood today, so let’s end it quickly.



Attack now, or I will!”

Urazadzu hit his staff against the ground, and stopped Steelrock who was ready to attack. He shook his head, saying, “Your Excellency, the reason I’m here is to protect the girl. It’s also to show you our greatest sincerity— if our only purpose was to find any legendary mage as a teacher for Mountainsea, we wouldn’t have given up such a huge sum.”

Sharon’s expression relaxed a little. The shaman was right; if the girl only wanted status, the price of 2,000,000 coins would be able to get almost any legendary mage that she wanted. Not every mage had the ability to accumulate wealth like she did.

The shaman saw the hesitation in Sharon’s eyes, and quickly took the chance, “Not all legendary mages qualify to teach Mountainsea. Honestly, the final list was very narrow.”

“Oh? How many?” he’d managed to hook her successfully.

“Two.” The number took Sharon by surprise, but she was obviously delighted. The other was definitely the Sword Saint of the Millennial Empire, and that truly was someone comparable to her.

This meant the Azuresnow Shrine and Empress Gelan disregarded all the other legendary mages on the continent. There may have been other reasons behind this choice as well, but Sharon couldn’t care less about that.

“Well well, old man; even though you disturbed my nap, you have great taste blessed by the Beast God, not bad at all! The payment showed your sincerity well enough. Right, Mountainsea, why is your name so odd? It doesn’t seem like a Klandor name.” Sharon’s gaze towards Mountainsea had grown much gentler. Of course, this was not due to Urazadzu’s words, instead being about the price. The huge sum was enough to soften the legendary mage greatly.

Having just been woken up, the legendary mage's mood had been poor. It was only now that they were facing the true Sharon.

Mountainsea's answer this time was different from the one she'd given Richard, "The elders told me only the height of the mountains and the depth of the seas can qualify to describe my wealth."

Sharon covered her mouth and laughed demurely, "Wealth that could only be described by mountains and seas? So you're saying that you're richer than me?"

It was a really cold joke. The grand mages could only force out a laugh or two to show support for their master. Only the grey dwarf had a twisted expression on his face, stuck between laughing and crying.

Mountainsea nodded as expected, replying in her usual straightforward way, "I'm a student of yours who's paying for herself; it only makes sense that I have more money. Ten million is nothing, you don't have to take it to heart. Of course, I understand why gold-plating is preferred to plating with abyssal ironjade in Norland."

Sharon's smile froze, and she raised her brows and asked with a sweet voice, "You said you're richer than me?"

"Of course!" Mountainsea nodded furiously.

# Book 1, Chapter 51 - Collision

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Sharon was about to say something, but then she saw a few black crystals on Mountainsea's braid as the girl nodded. Her stomach immediately dropped—those were isla diamonds, one of the most prized spatial crystals! This item was beyond rare, not something that could be acquired with money. Even if one traded for it with magic crystals, they'd still have to bank on their luck. Materials like these usually only traded for others of the same grade. Sharon herself only had about a dozen of these diamonds, but there were seven on Mountainsea's braid!

The legendary mage continued to scan the girl's other braids, her vision unsurpassable when she was serious. And just as expected—crystal dragon tooth, millennial unicorn horn, phoenix crown feather... These were things of similar rarity to the isla diamonds. What really shocked her was the sheer skill required to shrink items like dragon teeth and unicorn horns to a tenth of their original size to turn them into mere accessories!

She suddenly felt her head spinning. If one were to take all the accessories to Mountainsea's hair and sell them, they would be worth over a hundred million coins. But the problem was, even if one had that much money there wasn't normally any outlet to buy such items. Sharon couldn't bear the thought of carrying that much money on her head.

It wasn't like she was intimidated by just this much; she had her own collection of rare items. But the very fact that all this was just in Mountainsea's braid implied that this was just the tip of the iceberg. Maybe, just maybe, her wealth really could only be described by mountains and seas.

Sharon swallowed whatever words she was about to say, the peculiarity in her expression growing impossible to hide. The feeling of defeat she exuded could suddenly be felt from miles away, her imposing aura withering. She finally stretched out and

waved her hand, the golden pot of fruits flying before Mountainsea in no time.

“There! Mountainsea, these are for you. Stay as long as you want to, and look for Blackgold if you need anything. He’s that grey dwarf over there. I have urgent matters that I need to see to right now, and I’m not sure when I’ll be back. Don’t wait for me.” Before getting any replies, Sharon open a teleportation portal on the spot and disappeared from the place.

“I will pay my fees!” Mountainsea shouted in Sharon’s wake. In that moment, everyone looking at that departing back had an illusion that the legendary mage’s mood changed for the better.

The grand mages left one after another, but all of them cast inexplicable gazes at Mountainsea. Blackgold alone stayed, his eyes overflowing with adulations for the girl. Said girl was in no hurry to leave; she stayed behind and cleared the pot of fruits Sharon left for her at lightning speed. Within a minute the pot was wiped clean, and she stared with dissatisfaction at the empty pot as she licked her lips. This obviously wasn’t enough to satisfy her.

The grey dwarf immediately said, “There are more fruits! As long as you pay the school fees...”

A spider crystal came flying and hit the grey dwarf, making him swallow whatever he was about to say. Mountainsea waved her hand dismissively, “Get 50 pots to my room!” and then turned and looked at Steelrock and the old man before saying, “Another 50 for them too, send them to our campsite on the beach. Do it daily!”

Mountainsea was strikingly similar to Sharon in terms of appetite. If one went by the legendary mage’s theory of appetite determining power, this young girl would surely become a legendary being, maybe even surpassing that level. And thus Richard was left forgotten in the corner, his own future still a mystery.

“That won’t be a problem at all!” the grey dwarf replied loudly.

He was holding onto the spider crystal with both hands, his movements growing rigid again. Thankfully he was still in the right state of mind as he asked, “But, Your Highness, you don’t have a residence in the Deepblue yet. Should I get one for you?”

“No need for the trouble. I’ll just stay with him for my duration in the Deepblue!” Mountainsea directed her finger at Richard.

Richard was stunned. The grey dwarf could sense something amiss too, but the spider crystal was so bright that he did not raise any objections towards her suggestion. Richard’s own opinion? Nobody asked for that.

The girl stood up and said to the old man, “Weird, didn’t elder say that we need to bring out our profile and background when dealing with people of status, and that money is only used to bribe second-rate people? Why is mentor not afraid of my background but rather my wealth?”

She could feel the grey dwarf’s hesitation from the side and prompted him, “Say what’s on your mind!”

The grey dwarf spoke as softly as possible, “Um... Actually, Her Excellency can tolerate people who are stronger than her, but not people who are richer than her. So I’m guessing that she’s out to earn more now...”

Mountainsea was flabbergasted, “Do you need any effort in earning money? Just dig the mines in the mountains! Shaman, what do you think about this?”

Urazadzu touched his bare chin and smiled, “Your granny found you a cute mentor.”

Mountainsea nodded in full agreement, “Yes! And mentor smells really good as well, I want to take a bite of her! Just wait till the day when I can beat her!”

“It won’t be a long wait... Just half a...” the grey dwarf muttered under his breath, but the young girl had heard everything. Richard

felt iffy about the whole situation the moment Mountainsea mentioned smell, quickly backing away and leaving this bizarre place.

The competition against Steven was due soon, and he didn't have the time to take an extra shower with his packed schedule. He didn't want Mountainsea to be added on top of all this. Moreover, he was already a man, and naturally knew that Mountainsea staying over would upset Sharon. He got shivers just thinking about the mage's bright, blinding eyes. However, with her departure, the girl suddenly became the most influential power in the Deepblue. She could probably do anything she wanted now, and the grey dwarf had betrayed Sharon right before his eyes to join her side.

Richard found it hard to deal with this genuine 'friend' of his.

'I guess I'll hide...' he thought, but before he could take even two steps forward Mountainsea had emerged before him. She was all smiles, and her eyes lingered on his lips. All unrelated personnel looked away at that moment, acting like they could not see anything. However, they kept their ears alert.

"Ugh!" Richard let out a suffocating noise, but then a slap sounded followed by a roar of fury, "WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING?"

What he got in reply was a satisfied ring in the girl's voice, "Why are you angry? It's just a kiss. You don't lose anything from it. Richard, can you give me a gift again tonight- Hey! Why are you running? You think you can run away with my gift?"

On that very night, Mountainsea moved into Richard's place.

# Book 1, Chapter 52 - Days Together

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Richard knew all of the Deepblue's laws. One could throw a trespasser out by brute force, and they would not have to compensate for any injuries incurred or damage sustained. The law effectively allowed one to deal with intruders as they liked, but he got shivers at the mere thought of Mountainsea's abilities and immediately crossed out that idea. Another way was to lodge a complaint to Blackgold, whereafter the enforcers would teach the intruders the law. But would that really work out? Telling that grey dwarf about this girl? He removed this thought from his mind as well.

That was how Richard realised that the supposed laws of the Deepblue were pretty much useless before someone with strength and status like Mountainsea. It was thus that the two began living together. The girl moved in alone, only bringing a handful of clothes along. Steelrock, that old man, and her other guards did not follow. Nobody would know what went on once the door closed.

Of course, if anything violent were to happen, Richard would not be the cause.

That night, a bonfire illuminated the campsite of the barbarians, and fresh whale was being roasted atop it. The grease from the whale dripped into the dancing flames, making them sizzle. Warriors and young girls alike danced in a circle around the bonfire, to the tune of horns, drums, and flutes in the backdrop. The music was intense, its strong rhythm pulling the audience into dancing to it. These people simply had far too much to celebrate about, for instance their most beloved princess receiving a 'gift.'

Steelrock and the elder were sat in the corner, enjoying drinks and meat. It took entire barrels of alcohol for Steelrock to let out a satisfied sigh, "That Richard lad is pretty fine, but he's still too young. With Mistress so close to him, will there be any issues?"

The old man laughed in reply, “Steelrock, did you forget Mistress’s unique innate ability? What she’s really fond of is the smell of Richard’s bloodline. It’s quite rare for someone to have the blood of both devils and elves.”

“Devils and elves? Well, that’s rare, but nothing special, right?” Steelrock scratched his head in confusion.

The old man shook his head, “No, it’s not that straightforward. It is almost impossible for two pure bloodlines to crossbreed. And by right, the strength of a hybrid’s blood grows weaker by the generations, and they won’t be easy to spot after a while. That boy is strange; I felt an unknown strength lurking within him, but couldn’t determine its nature. Someone covered it up; maybe Sharon, maybe someone else, but that bloodline ability of his is only the start. His soul is pure and forthright, and he has many essential abilities that could guarantee his ascent.”

“That makes sense. Honestly, after travelling to so many places in Norland I’ve rarely seen anyone who can’t be knocked down with money. Sharon is one, and this young boy is another,” Steelrock praised.

Were the legendary mage present, she would have first grown elated before beating this cunning and deceitful giant up for playing a fool in front of her.

The old man raised his head to the starry night of Floe Bay, the five moons in the sky unable to steal its limelight, “We don’t have to worry. The Beast God will lead Mistress to the people she should get close to,” Urazadzu lifted his cup and drank everything in one shot.

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The days with Mountainsea were a bizarre but unforgettable experience. There were only three things in her daily routine. She was either eating, sleeping, or clinging to Richard. She never set aside time for practice, instead wasting her days away like



someone who really fitted the definition of ‘gold-plated.’

Richard was somewhat worried about Mountainsea; since she'd already spent millions of coins to become Sharon's pupil, he thought she might as well make full use of it. Learning something was better than learning nothing at all, and she should have served her money well. But these coins were worthless in the girl's eyes. She told Richard that she didn't need to train specifically as long as she had enough food and sleep to grow.

Richard's first reaction upon hearing that was to stare at his schedule for a long time, before he eventually focused on an experiment to put an end to the conversation. Talking to Mountainsea was normally a pleasure, but sometimes it really pushed his buttons.

Mountainsea pushed away the plates in front of her, following Richard to the lab before curling up in a large chair for her afternoon nap. These days, the only thing that satisfied her in Deepblue was eating; that included Richard's meals and Sharon's fruits.

For the first three days she'd moved in, Richard had never been full. His meals had grown to ten kilos by virtue of Sharon, but even if the alchemists wanted to double his meals several of the rare ingredients in them had short shelf lives. They usually had to order these foods a month or two early, and the cooking took a lot of effort as well. They used up all their reserves, but they couldn't bring out any more.

At one point, they thought about bringing out other food items for Mountainsea, but she looked at the plates and gagged in a disgusting manner, just like a picky child. Before she could say anything Steelrock had done the work for her, yelling at Blackgold as the dwarf thoroughly wiped his sweat and promised that both of them would have similar treatment in regards to meals in the future. In Blackgold's eyes, Steelrock's brown skin had started to glow emerald like that of his mistress.

On the third day, Sharon who was earning money on another plane sent a message back with a menu. Thus, from the fourth day, Mountainsea had her own personalised lunch and dinner. The girl resembled a house cat ever since then, looking forward to meal times everyday. Richard could never figure out how she could finish a 50kg meal within 3 minutes, just like he could not figure how Sharon was perpetually eating fruits. Their stomachs seemed to be spatial voids. Regardless, he could finally have a meal that filled his own stomach.

Mountainsea's preferences were rather bizarre, and the meal that Sharon curated for her smelled strong and grotesque. The girl did offer some to Richard, but he lost all appetite the moment he took a whiff of the food. The girl herself found it strangely tasty, using both her hands to sweep through the box like a tornado. She would leave deep tooth marks in the cutlery, especially ones from her canines, even if it was all made of stainless steel. They changed it into carbon steel the next day, but with even that failing they switched to high-carbon steel used to make shields. They then tried lafite steel on the fourth, the same material used in rune knights' breastplates. The destruction only stopped on the fifth day, when they changed to obsidian. Only a handful of even rune knights qualified to have weapons made out of this material.

# Book 1, Chapter 53 - Days Together

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It took Richard a while to realise Mountainsea's secret. She wasn't really particular about the taste the food offered, no. What interested her instead was the amount of nutrients packed within. The discovery made him feel like she'd even gnaw on magic crystals if she could.

Outside of eating, the most important part of her life seemed to be sleep. This was especially true just after meals, when she'd immediately fall into deep sleep. She slept as Richard meditated, worked, and studied, only leaving him to play in some unknown corner of the Deepblue when he had lessons to attend. Most of the time, she was within five metres of him.

She continued to 'abide' by the laws, taking up just enough classes as was required for a personal apprentice of the legendary mage, but the only use of this timetable of hers was in calculating her monthly payments.

She also didn't seem to understand the meaning of reservations. She never tried to avoid Richard, even when she showered, so he had to get used to her beautiful slender body. Her emerald skin was glossy like silk, and looked so tender to the touch it made his imagination run wild. On top of everything, her long straight legs were enough to make any man go crazy.

Richard was already a man, so sleeping next to her was a nightly torture. She couldn't keep her hands to herself in bed, taking every chance she could to lie on Richard's chest. She'd eventually end up wrapped around him, leaving their private parts in close proximity. At the peak of his vitality with an ever-hungry bloodline and food curated specifically for such purposes, it was unbearable for him to be so close to her.

"We're just friends, just friends..." he muttered to himself whenever he failed to fall asleep, suppressing the urge to press

down on the unrivalled beauty with overflowing youthfulness. Sometimes he looked at her face in sound sleep and comforted himself, "This isn't my choice..."

He didn't realise that he didn't lose energy during the day despite the restless sleep, nor was his progress slowed. He also didn't understand the danger of trying to subdue the girl until a mosquito flew nearby one day.

Mosquitoes were exotic creatures. It was impossible to keep them out even as a legendary mage, and they existed even in the Deepblue. However, as the particular mosquito barrelled towards Mountainsea's face under Richard's close scrutiny, it was only able to reach a metre's radius of her before a soft pop left it vanished into thin air. All that was left in its wake was a faint green trail of smoke. It had left him in cold sweat.

For her first few days moved in, Mountainsea disappeared whenever Richard had classes. She said she performed all kinds of activities, including fishing with her tribe. However, she seemed more and more disinterested in such things as time passed, spending increasing amounts of time with Richard. She was even following him to classes. Urazadzu and Steelrock were hardly seen as well, and her guards seemed to be enjoying a rare vacation.

However, this caused the grey dwarf who was observing everything quietly to grow more nervous. The responsibility for Mountainsea's safety had just fallen on his shoulders. Putting his duty and the possible consequences aside, the Deepblue's annual finances were dependent on Mountainsea as well, and that was enough to make Blackgold more careful than ever. Personally, too, every time he looked at Mountainsea it was like seeing the largest and most abundant mine of his life. His feelings for her were beyond worship and adoration; as long as this mine so much as walked past him, he would be up in the clouds for a long while.

So the grey dwarf decided to give his all in protecting Mountainsea, specially increasing the number of enforcers around

Richard's residence and public areas twofold, as well as adding a fully equipped rune knight to the patrol. The number of mages that were on duty the sentry points on each level were also doubled, and the seventeen grand mages were stationed at the ground floor of the tower so they could take immediate action in case of emergency.

The borders of the Deepblue were surrounded by a dark aura, and many in the grey areas of life were alerted as the atmosphere around them grew more tense. It was as if a pair of invisible eyes was posted at every dark corner, staring at them, watching their every move. The street rats were hypersensitive to any possible danger, and the grey dwarf had added a thousand magic eyes at the borders in one go. That may have been a little too much, but the message was clear and it also brightened up the grey districts.

A few rats seemed unable to get a hold of the situation, still going on the hunt even if they sensed danger thinking that they were invincible. However, curiosity was a deadly weapon. Any that ventured out disappeared without a trace into the gloomy night, as if they'd never even existed.

Any who dared find trouble with the grey dwarf at this critical juncture would realise the fear his drunken kin inspired when enraged. The grey dwarf did not need a warning accompanied by great fanfare—the disappearances were notice enough. Eventually, all the mice went back to hiding in their nests.

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Naya's mood hadn't been pleasant the last few days. The bloody smell lingering in his kitchen would take a long time to fade, and the putrid stench turned his dishes foul. It also added a weird smell to the wines stored in the cellar. Truth be told, the longer one stayed in the underworld the more they would grow to hate the smell of blood. The only exceptions were perverts.

Another reason for Naya's mood was that he'd already done so

much for Blackgold, but the dwarf hadn't allowed him to pay a single coin less in tax. The grey dwarf had felt it inappropriate for the enforcers to step into the borders with nothing having happened, so the dirty work was left to the Blade of Calamity and his brothers. His dagger that had been used to execute major characters had been stained by rats' blood.

Even killers had their dignity, and when Naya complained to Blackgold that he couldn't take it anymore, the dwarf only replied with a "The times have changed." The times changed, yes, but the tax never did. That was something the grey dwarf knew to be unwritten rules.

This had gotten an angry reprimand from Naya. "Unwritten rules, what utter bullshit!" he cursed, of course only in secret and after the grey dwarf left. He had no choice but to continue searching earnestly for the rats that didn't know better, feeling his heart ache at the amount of tax he would have to pay the month. His monthly tax was already greater than the yearly profits of his small tavern.

Naya was still willing to do this sort of tough work for the dwarf, however, because Blackgold possessed immeasurable power. And indeed, he couldn't escape the pursuit of the legendary mage either. But the true reason he was willing to work so hard was that he'd already fallen deeply in love with the peace and stability in the Deepblue. He loved to watch Richard grow under his guidance, day by day by day.

# Book 1, Chapter 54 - Days Together

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To be fair, the Deepblue was relatively safe, especially around the main tower. Men like Steven were in the minority, with few being formidable enough to take such risks that could endanger one's own life. However, he was still living well in the Deepblue, and the power of his subordinates was increasing day by day. To ensure victory in the competition, Duke Solam had sent another large army in assistance, and now the grey dwarf was starting to regret advocating for the warlock to stay. Mountainsea and Richard were stuck together every day, and it wouldn't be all that surprising for Steven to dare assassinate Richard or harm Mountainsea. After all, someone who'd lost all rationale wouldn't consider the consequences of their actions.

The grey dwarf firmly believed that Mountainsea was invincible. No matter the race, age or method of accumulating riches, someone as wealthy as Mountainsea was no doubt beyond fortunate and greatly blessed by the gods. Yet Steven happened to be a classic example of the exact opposite. Thus, Blackgold was not worried that Mountainsea's life would be threatened; he was only worried that she would be harrassed.

Stuck between a rock and a hard place, the grey dwarf finally made a difficult choice. Steven started to see four mage enforcers and two knights surrounding him the moment he left his residence every day, to 'protect' him. They wouldn't leave his side at all, even in lessons.

News travelled relatively fast in the Deepblue. Everyone had become aware of Mountainsea's status and 'background' within two days of her following Richard to classes. Nobody dared to joke about her name in the open anymore, and she almost stopped becoming the topic of idle conversation.

Time flew by day by day, and the competition drew closer. The grey dwarf personally met Richard in the meantime and spoke to

him for a long time. Describing all the hardships Sharon had to go through, he first explained how it was not easy for her to acquire the wealth she now possessed. Next, he tactfully expressed that Sharon's delight towards Richard was by far unprecedented, following which he made clear at the dire state the Deepblue's finances were in. In the words of the grey dwarf, the Deepblue practically had to be broken up tomorrow to be sold for cheap in order to repay the heavy debts. With a heavy heart, Richard was wondering if there was anything he could do for the legendary mage. Just then, the grey dwarf changed the topic and started singing in a high tone, telling Richard that the saviour of the Deepblue had appeared, and that was none other than Mountainsea.

Finally, the grey dwarf jumped onto the coffee table in front of Richard. Looking him in the eye, the dwarf implored Richard in his most sincere and solemn tone—the time to repay Sharon had come. The best thing he could do for her was to be a good companion to Mountainsea, keeping her in the Deepblue as long as possible. The girl had only reserved a month's worth of lessons the first time, and the next round of reservations was coming up soon. In addition, the grey dwarf also hinted that Richard should fulfil all of Mountainsea's requests to the best of his abilities, such as giving her more little 'gifts', since they would not be to his detriment anyway.

Dumbstruck at his words, Richard started to suspect whether the grey dwarf had planted magic eyes around his residence. As long as Richard was willing to lend his support, the grey dwarf promised that he would be indebted to him forever and will help him win the competition.

A downcast and solemn Richard left Blackgold's office. Although he couldn't exactly define his feelings right then, he felt like the pure, unadulterated relationship he shared with Mountainsea was tainted. He decided to forget all about the promise the moment he



stepped out the door.

That night, Mountainsea received a long-awaited 'gift' after dinner relatively successfully. Of course, if Richard hadn't resisted the process could have been called completely successful, though there wasn't much of a difference.

Though pleased, Mountainsea was observant enough to realise Richard seemed to be down. Concerned, she asked, "Is something bothering you?"

Richard nodded.

"Willing to share?" she continued expectantly, hands on her face.

This time, Richard shook his head. The girl let out a sigh before standing by his side quietly, looking at him design a new magic rune.

And thus their time passed quietly, the day of the competition drawing closer and closer. Mountainsea stayed in the Deepblue far beyond the original month she was supposed to, but showed no signs of leaving. Every additional day she stayed made Blackgold view Richard in a more positive light, since each day translated to a hefty amount in tuition and living expenses that relieved the Deepblue of some of its heavy debts.

Life was always full of coincidences. Though it seemed like Richard could wait as quietly he had been until the arrival of the competition, one day he ran into Steven by chance at a class. This was a rare occurrence; either by purpose or not the two of them hadn't picked the same class since the topic of the competition had been revealed. Blackgold himself had been extra careful to keep them apart in the general classes.

Seeing Richard again, the dragon warlock's blood began to boil. His face darkened immediately, but he kept himself calm and collected as he instantly walked up to Richard while pulling Minnie up at his side.

The dragon warlock's confidence did not come from his own subordinates. It was instead backed, literally, by the four mage enforcers and two knights behind him. Though he already knew that these were men sent by Blackgold to control and keep an eye on him, many others misunderstood the men as an elevation of the dragon warlock's position in the Deepblue. After all, not even the grand mages warranted such high levels of protection! Thus, Steven decided to make the best out of the misunderstanding to force Richard to give way, even if such temporary suppression held no significance in the grand scheme of things.

Striding up to the centre of the road, he was just about to speak before he felt an emptiness behind him. Looking back hurriedly, he found his guards standing far from him at their original positions, with no intention to follow close. All of their gazes were focused on the girl next to Richard. Puzzled, the dragon warlock immediately turned towards the girl, only to be reminded of Mountainsea's true identity and how she easily knocked him off his feet that fateful midsummer night.

It was at the same time that Richard looked up and saw the dragon warlock, frowning in reaction. He didn't fear Steven, but the youth's blood-drained face confused him.

Before Richard could even react, Steven took a large stride towards the other side of the road with Minnie by his side. Not dropping his gaze, he looked as if he had meant to cross the road in the first place.

It was only when he reached the other side of the road that Steven put on an act and turned around to glare fiercely at Richard. He was especially careful in avoiding Mountainsea; it was one thing for Duke Solam to anger Richard—Gaton hadn't yet begun his expansion that would shock everyone— but another matter altogether to incur the wrath of the princess of the Millennial Empire! If that were to happen, Steven had no idea what he could do.

Richard on the other hand was stumped for words, confused by Steven's puzzling actions. With no answer after a minute of deep consideration, it was only when his gaze fell on Mountainsea by his side that he finally understood the dragon warlock's attempt. By this time, however, Steven had already disappeared beyond the corner of the street safely.

Richard was unable to hold back a laugh, not taking the incident to heart. Since the dragon warlock had never appeared in Mountainsea's field of view, to her he was amongst the objects that could just fly away on their own.

# Book 1, Chapter 55 - Truth And Lies

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Dusk arrived once more, and a long-absent roar resounded from Steven's residence. Minnie curled up in a corner of the sofa without a sound, yet another fresh red handprint added to her face. In the meanwhile, a few alchemists of the Solam Family were busying themselves in front of the laboratory table. All of them had intensive knowledge of runes, even if they didn't have the innate skills to be true runemasters. Their knowledge with regards to the handling of magic items alone saved Steven a lot of time. Upon hearing the roar, the magic alchemists merely shot each other glances, shrugged their shoulders, and pretended not to have heard anything while continuing the tasks at hand.

Steven shattered yet another vase, but that wasn't enough to abate his rage. He shouted with unrestrained rage, "Richard! It's Richard again! What else has he been withholding from me? First, it was Sharon, and now it's the princess of the Millennial Empire. Why are all the women attracted to him? What do they see in this prepubescent kid?"

After his outburst diminished some of his anger, Steven turned to look at Minnie. Minnie was beautiful and bright, but she failed in all aspects when compared against Mountainsea; even when it comes to her appearance. Perhaps the only area in which Minnie could have rivalled Mountainsea was her personality, but even then it was hard to determine what was superior between wild and aloof. Mountainsea still stood out as being purer, however, but that was all in the past. The Minnie here, today, had been withered away into a pitiful soul, her former confidence beaten out of her.

In Steven's eyes, Minnie was but a burden who could give him no aid at all, let alone back him up decisively like Mountainsea would Richard. Minnie was very clear about the connotations that lay within Steven's gaze. Even though she had certain fantasies before, the slap had fully awakened her. She suddenly sneered, sat up

straight, and stuck her chest out, commenting, “That girl’s name is Mountainsea.”

“Of course I know her name! I even know that she’s the granddaughter of Empress Gelan! Literally everybody in the Deepblue knows, you’re useless!” Steven once again suppressed his anger.

“I heard that the astonishing amount of wealth she has was because she uses beyslace spider crystals as currency.” Minnie’s voice remained calm, as if she was not afraid of a potential outburst from Steven.

The dragon warlock laughed exaggeratedly, “I already know this! The first time she used the spider crystals to pay, I was the one who suffered a blow from her. Are you trying to mock me?”

Minnie gave a faint smile, “She’s already living with Richard. That is to say, he can fully use her resources. I’m afraid a single crystal will send your plan of gold and influence up in smoke. Should she be willing to take out two crystals, or resources of an equal value, your chances of success would be less than half.”

Steven was startled, his face instantly overcast. He’d been afraid of the exact thing Minnie was talking about, but because the repercussions of the matter were too severe he’d intentionally chosen to neglect any possibilities in the area. Duke Solam had given his entire support to him, but he could still only take out two or three more million, not even a third of a spider crystal’s value. The thought of that fire dragon neck hide caused his heart to wrench.

“In that case, what do you think I should do now?” Steven hesitated but eventually decided to ask. He could tell that Minnie had more things to say, and could even guess what she had thought of. That was why he didn’t look too good.

“It’s very simple. You can’t just immerse yourself in your own matters. You have to know what Richard is doing, obtain his

designs, and then make a targeted attempt at improving your own.”

Steven smiled gloomily, but still furthered the conversation with more questions, “In that case, what can I do to find out what Richard is up to? He isn’t going to come forth and tell me, is he?”

Minnie straightened out her messy hair, “I’ll go. I’ll pretend to join him and plead with him to take me in. Richard is still a child, and is empathetic. Furthermore, he has just become a man not long ago. As long as I act the part, he should take the bait.”

“Just became a man not long ago...” Steven repeatedly mouthed those words. He placed his arms behind his back, and paced back and forth countless times before finally stopping before Minnie. He gazed into Minnie’s eyes, and slowly commented, “In order to make it more believable, you will most probably go to bed with him, is that not the case?”

Minnie admitted, “That’s for sure. If not, he will never trust me.”

The dragon warlock laughed weirdly, “Haha! What a sacrifice you are making!”

“Because you’ve already paid a high price, we cannot afford to lose further!” Minnie’s reply truncated the dragon warlock’s laughter. He stared at Minnie with a dead gaze, but her own was clear and determined; not once did she avoid him.

“Women are indeed tough creatures...” Steven muttered. He straightened his body and walked towards the full-length window, watching Floe Bay illuminated by the moonlight. The dim rays seemed to make the ground even darker today, and it took a quarter hour for Steven to speak up, “Then go. But remember our marriage pact. If you conceive with him, and decide to give birth, then our marriage pact will lose effect immediately.”

“I know my boundaries,” Minnie said indifferently. She stood up, and stationed herself behind Steven. “Give it to me once more, the

slap earlier wasn't enough."

Steven squinted his eyes and levelled another dead gaze at the blue-red new moon on the horizon outside his window, before suddenly making a turn and lifting up his arm, using the back of his hand to slap Minnie with a force that sent her flying in the air.

Minnie's weak body turned a few rounds in the air, before falling heavily onto the ground. Blood flowed uncontrollably from the corners of her mouth and her nose. Her face had swollen up immediately, and the fresh red of blood covered the imprint on her face. Her forehead knocked into granite as she fell, crimson flowing down her sideburns to cover more than half of her face.

Minnie did not cry, instead revealing a distorted smile. "That was sufficient," she said.

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Midnight. Richard was still working hard in the world of math and formulae. Mountainsea was stood next to him, staring at the densely packed numbers in deep thought.

For some reason, she'd slowly begun participating in Richard's designing sessions. She had a gift with numbers and sensitivity for mana that allowed her to catch up to Richard's own train of thought, and although she was unfamiliar with the specific structures of runes she could use the theories behind sacred totems to offer suggestions. A lot of times, these suggestions had offered Richard many alternatives that he himself hadn't thought of.

Mountainsea was also very mesmerised with the theory behind rune design, mostly because of the simple yet precise explanations Richard gave her of the principles and mentality behind runecrafting. Of course, helping would also give her a good reason to stay with Richard and enjoy his presence.

A magic bell suddenly rang at this moment, meaning someone was lurking outside the residence and wanted to meet Richard.

Richard's brows furrowed, and he hurried to open the door for fear of breaking his train of thought.

A woman shrouded in a black cape was stood outside the door, her lowered face concealed beneath her cap. Richard could tell just from the figure that it was Minnie, however, and thought it quite incomprehensible.

"Minnie?" Richard attempted to ask.

The teenage girl lifted her cape, and mocked herself, "I didn't think you would recognise me."

What alarmed Richard most was not his accurate guess, but Minnie's severely deformed face, and the blood stains that she had not completely wiped clean.

"Not inviting me in?" Minnie asked nonchalantly.

"Your... Alright, come on in." Richard had seen the handbag in Minnie's hands. The bag was unzipped, and one could see many clothes and other items within. Settling her down in the living room, Richard came forth with a plate of fruits.

Ever since Mountainsea arrived, Blackgold was sending over fifty plates every day. Mountainsea wanted to pay him with spider crystals, but he rejected it. All the services and food provided to her was done strictly by the book, and this included school fees and other miscellaneous expenditure. Just because Mountainsea had an ocean of wealth didn't mean that they'd overcharge her by even a single gold coin. Of course, Mountainsea's truancy and the costs incurred during the Deepblue lessons were two different matters. Only the midsummer auction was an exception, because the customers had the freedom to bid whichever price they deemed fit.

These minute details showcased the pride of the Deepblue. No matter how much Sharon and the grey dwarf loved gold coins, they would never receive more than what they were entitled to. The grey dwarf depended on providing perfect service as a source



of income, whereas the legendary mage would rather earn her keep in the endless planes.

Having been in the Deepblue for about 3 years, Richard has also been heavily influenced by this mindset. He'd hesitated himself before taking out this expensive plate of fruits, because it belonged to Mountainsea. However, other than this he had nothing else to offer the girl who'd just arrived.

Richard sat across Minnie, the magic light illuminating the living room making the wounds on Minnie's face even more clear. It made his heart twitch. He didn't have any designs on her, but he felt sorry that a beautiful girl had been beaten to such a state.

"Who did that?" Richard asked, his brows furrowed. Minnie was Sharon's apprentice; there were few with the guts to lay their hands on her.

Minnie smiled bitterly, "It was Steven. Don't bother looking for the enforcers, this is a family matter. The two of us are engaged."

Richard understood immediately. He looked at Minnie calmly and asked a direct question, "Since it's a family matter, all the more reason I can't interfere. However, what ideas did you have when you brought your luggage and came over? Do you actually think that I will take you in?"

Minnie lowered her head, "As you can see, I simply cannot stay with Steven. You... you're the only one I can look to..."

"Lies." Mountainsea walked over all of a sudden. It was already her sleeping time, so her eyes were half closed as she walked to the tableside and sat beside Richard. She nudged her head into Richard's own before going to deep sleep on the table.

He smiled at the girl, but once he turned to look back at Minnie that smile vanished. An ice cold serenity filled the air, "You heard what she said. I trust her."

# Book 1, Chapter 56 - Unforgivable

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Minnie gritted her teeth and asked, “I... Alright, then, are you confident in winning the competition?”

Richard grinned, “What makes you think that I will answer you?”

Minnie let out a huge sigh, “I understand. But I only have one request. If you think you can win, then please take me in for two months, just two months. Steven will definitely be exiled from the Deepblue, and I won’t be able to pay the fees anymore. I’ll stop being her apprentice as well; it seems clear that Master will keep you as the only remaining student. My family already sold me to the Solams, but I don’t want to sink together with Steven. As long as you help me through this ordeal, I... I will definitely be like Erin and depend on myself to survive in Deepblue after this.”

“Truth,” Mountainsea said groggily.

Richard did not know whether to laugh or to cry. The tense atmosphere had been broken entirely by her comment. He knocked playfully on her forehead, before continuing to stare at Minnie. Only Richard was able to act in this manner towards Mountainsea. If it were somebody else, even before they came into contact their hands would have been amputated.

“Is that so? Then tell me, how does it benefit me if I decide to take you in? Currently, the only outcome I can foresee is the Solam Family growing even more vengeful,” Richard said calmly.

Minnie straightened her body, displaying her curves that would entice many, before stating seriously, “I can tell you about all the plans and preparations Steven has been making so far. I also have a lot of information on the Solam Family’s resources and funding proposals. And, and... During the entire time you take me in, I’ll be... I’ll be all yours.! You can do whatever you want with me!”

“Truth.” Mountainsea was in deep sleep, and had already begun to snore, but had not forgotten to assess the situation. Richard could not help it but to raise his hands wanting to hit her forehead once more, but he eventually decided against it.

Minnie struck while the iron was hot, and continued, “Your relationship with the Solam Family was never good anyway. There’s no love lost between the two of you, how big is this addition? Besides, at the scale of huge families there’s no permanent allies or enemies. Such a small matter is insignificant in the grand scheme of things, the Solams won’t make it difficult for you even if just for Marquess Gaton’s sake. Should Steven lose the competition, he would have to give up on his bloodline and move on to learn from Saint Klaus. Judging from his three level 3 runes, Saint Klaus is not even qualified enough to be termed a runemaster. Should Steven depend on him, he would not be able to overcome the obstacle to becoming a level 2 runemaster. Only as a dragonblooded runemaster can he build specific level 3 runes.”

“Truth.”

Richard challenged, “But no matter what, he would still be able to become a runemaster, wouldn’t he? That is already a good outcome in itself.”

“No, it’s not the same. The Solam Family has invested too much in him. Should he not be able to become a great runemaster, he will have to serve for the rest of his life without any status,” Minnie retorted.

“Truth.”

Richard got up, “No matter what, you’ll still be the wife of a runemaster who’s also an elite warlock. That’s already much better than having to forcefully stay in the Deepblue. I’m afraid I can’t help you, please leave.”

“Ah! No! Why? I didn’t wish to be his wife! That engagement contract was one that practically sold me over to the Solams! And

it's your fault too! If it wasn't for your Viscount Alice, my father wouldn't have sold me!"

"Truth."

Richard furrowed his brows, and asked calmly, "So, are you trying to push the blame on me now?"

Minnie's faced dimmed. She lowered her head instantly, tears flowing uncontrollably down her face. She explained gently, "Who am I to pursue the responsibility? My father just hopes another Archeron doesn't attack us. Alright, I know I've done many things that have let you down in the past, but I believe this competition is important to you too. If you would still take a second look at me, as long as you are willing, I'm yours from today onwards. Please?"

"Truth."

However, Richard had already opened the gates of his house, "I have zero desire to find out what Steven is doing, or even what you're doing for the matter. Forgive me, I'm afraid I can't help you in any way. It's about time for me to enter meditation, please leave."

Minnie lifted her luggage with both hands, and walked out of the gates of the residences with low spirits. The metal gates shut tight behind her, letting out a deep thud as they closed.

"Richard! I hate you!" Minnie rushed towards the metal gates and shouted with all her might, before slumping to the ground. She hugged her knees and started sobbing. Her voice could still be heard despite the gates.

"Truth..." Mountainsea said yet another word groggily. Feeling that her posture was uncomfortable, she propped herself up and reluctantly opened her eyes only to realise that Minnie was already gone. "Eh? Where is she? You chased her away? But she was speaking the truth all this while."

Richard went silent. He let out a huge sigh before nodding his

head.

“Cruel!” she stood up and straightened her body, but even so her eyes could barely open.

Richard sighed once more, “Some animosity can never be forgiven.”

Mountainsea instantly became more alert, and tried once more to widen her eyes before gazing seriously at Richard, “You appear more like a 130 year old old man than a 13 year old teenager!”

Richard smiled helplessly, and could only explain once more: “Perhaps I went through a lot more when I was younger...” Although he already had a general understanding of his blessing of wisdom, it wasn’t something he could explain to others.

Mountainsea covered her mouth and yawned repeatedly, disrupting Richard: “I know, I know! You’ve already said it upteen times, isn’t it just because of love and enmity? Norland’s men are all like that! What about this: you can be my man, and I’ll avenge you! I have everything you Norlanders want. Just like Norlanders would say, ‘I have manpower, money, and such a prestigious background too!’”

Richard felt angry, but was amused at the same time. He clenched his fist and knocked her head, “Who taught you all this nonsense? Also, don’t imitate your mentor!” Richard was slightly baffled as to how Mountainsea could imitate the legendary mage even though she had only met her for a short while.

“Alright.” Mountainsea was exceptionally well-behaved, and even offered her head for Richard to knock on. But Richard did not have the heart to do so. Furthermore, he knew that she was merely doing that to get closer to him.

“It’s time for me to go meditate.” Hearing that, Mountainsea let out a cheer.

A while later, Richard settled himself down in the meditation

room and slowly went deep into meditation. The incense from a finger-length joss-stick diffused throughout the whole room, the aroma sending him there faster. At the same time, this incense stick that Mountainsea used had powerful magic that increased the effectiveness of this session. Even if he dozed off, the effects would be much better than proper meditation elsewhere.

And now, Mountainsea curled up next to Richard like a tiger cub. She held onto him tightly, and let out gentle snores.

# Book 1, Chapter 57 - A Fateful Battle

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The competition had finally arrived. The missing legendary mage finally returned to the Deepblue just the night before, allowing the grand mages to heave a sigh of relief that they wouldn't have to postpone the event. This competition was no doubt one of the most important affairs of the Deepblue in recent times, and as time passed more and more people had started placing bets on the match. Although the competition was of a more personal nature and between Richard and Steven alone, the title of inheritor to Sharon's runecrafting expertise was enough to attract public attention.

Once she arrived in the Deepblue, the legendary mage immediately called for a meeting with all the grand mages. Her brows were knitted, an obvious indication of her ill mood. This prompted all the grand mages present to sit still, and not engage with her. Sharon waited and waited for her snack to be served. When the dark-skinned slave finally came, she was surprised to see that the golden basin only consisted of a pathetic amount and variety of fruits and her favourites were all missing.

She relaxed her furrowed brows, raising a single one, "What is this? Where are all my fruits?"

Blackgold came around her immediately and muttered, "All sold."

"Impossible! I had enough stock for half a year!" she raised her voice.

"Mountainsea's appetite is larger than yours, Master. And she has already been eating them for 3 months now, so... there isn't much left in the stock now," Blackgold reported carefully.

"Why is she still here?" Sharon's voice turned icy-cold. But the gray dwarf was long prepared, as he handed her two receipts, "This is the amount of money we've earned just from the fruit sale

alone. And this is her overall spending in the Deepblue.”

Sharon’s expression did look a lot better after looking the receipts. Earning money almost always made her happy, even if it was just an extra gold coin, and Blackgold knew that very well. Nonetheless, these earnings did not make her as delighted as expected, and even her hard work out there for these two months did not lift her spirits a bit.

Sharon had actually obtained an Isla diamond in her two months away, something equal to her annual expenses. But that hadn’t brought her happiness either, and the reason was simple: the more she earned, the more she saw the difference between Mountainsea’s wealth and her own.

The sulky legendary mage put down the receipts after praising Blackgold and asked, “How’s the preparation for tomorrow’s battle?”

“All the preparations are done. We were only awaiting Your Excellency.”

“Alright, let’s begin on time. It doesn’t seem like I could get anymore out of Solam either, and I’m excited to see what kind of surprise my little Richard is going to bring me.”

“Your Excellency, should we make any prior preparations?” The gray dwarf asked with precaution.

“Preparations? What preparations?” The legendary mage was slightly flabbergasted. She was already ready to leave as she stood up, but she could tell Blackgold was trying to hint at something and it seemed bizarre. “How can my little Richard lose?”

Blackgold had no choice but to be more straightforward about what he was trying to say, “But the Solam Family is fully supporting Steven. Even if he made his runes himself, the designs come from Saint Klaus. Richard has been exploring things himself, and never asked for any help from either his family or



Mountainsea.

“Didn’t Mountainsea give him a piece of fire dragon neck hide?” Sharon asked coldly.

“He stowed that skin away, and did not even touch it,” Blackgold explained.

That made Sharon a little happier, and something like a smile almost immediately spread across her face. She stretched lazily and said, “Don’t worry, Saint Klaus is a piece of trash that only know how to follow rules with no creativity at all. He won’t ever become a proper great runemaster his entire life, and he won’t be able to design anything impressive. I already took him into consideration when I was setting the topic. Even if there were thirty more Saints behind his name he still won’t be able to win with Steven’s abilities.”

Blackgold realised that Sharon knew nothing about Richard’s design, and reminded her again, “But Richard might not be able to win either!”

Sharon was getting annoyed as she waved her hand dismissively and said, “Stop complicating matters! However the competition turns out, just announce Richard as the winner, won’t that do?”

The grey dwarf was stunned upon Sharon’s words, “How do we explain to Solam’s clan then?”

The legendary mage scoffed, “Just say Gaton paid more! If Solam has any dissatisfaction he can go straight to him!”

The grey dwarf’s breath caught in his throat. Before he could even say anything Sharon was already halfway out the door. Judging from her incessant yawns with her fist against her mouth she was likely going to go sleep. Blackgold couldn’t do anything but agree with her for the time being.

The peaceful night passed quickly, the battle set to start at nine the following morning. The venue was a personal experiment

arena of Sharon's, and apart from the participants themselves only she and the other grand mages were present on scene. Mountainsea was seated next to Richard as a supporter of his, with Urazadzu, Steelrock, and her guards behind her.

The Solams had protested against this to Blackgold, saying Mountainsea and other unrelated personnel shouldn't be present since the battle wasn't public. They claimed that they wouldn't know at all if Urazadzu killed Steven's snow rabbit in the dark.

But those allegations were shot down mercilessly. Blackgold told them that Mountainsea was still a student of Sharon's, and that they shouldn't look down on the Deepblue. Even if the Solam Family members present here couldn't tell, Sharon and the other grand mages present could. The dwarf's imposing manner left Steven feeling in the wrong.

Besides, Steven and his family wouldn't have dared to go against even the grey dwarf openly, more so let Mountainsea know about their unhappiness. Both the legendary mage and Mountainsea were considered superior powers, and regardless of the outcome of this battle offending either would affect Duke Solam's entire life and future. It'd be even more risky now that everyone knew about Mountainsea's 'background'.

The entrance of the winter wolf into the arena signified the start of the battle. They'd drawn ballots, and Steven was the first to step up. Walking towards the arena, he solemnly lifted the cloth covering his cage's entrance and opened the door. Outside stepped the snow rabbit that the Solams and Saint Klaus had poured their blood and sweat into for the past half year.

What shocked everyone was that the snow rabbit was as large as a hunting hound.

# Book 1, Chapter 58 - A Fateful Battle

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This snow rabbit was obviously mutated. Not only did it have sharp fangs and claws, scales had covered many parts of its body. What's more, the area not covered in scales was protected by meticulously forged scale mail as well.

Blackgold jumped at the sight of it, exclaiming, "What is that? It can use equipment?"

"It's a snow rabbit! Alright everyone, quiet! Begin quickly!" Sharon yawned with a hand over her mouth.

Steven sent a fervent gaze in the legendary mage's way, feeling like Sharon was still biased towards him. The Solams had prepared all kinds of explanations in case they investigated into their armoured rabbit, but their participation was still upheld. Sharon just brushed it aside the moment Blackgold brought it up. It was a pity, though; she didn't spare a single glance at Steven, like something else was on her mind. It was obvious she had no interest in watching this battle.

The winter wolf sent a low howl echoing throughout the arena, crouching towards the ground. This was an enemy it had never come across, so it chose to be both cautious and observant. As a mature male, it was both fierce and cunning.

On the other hand, the mutated snow rabbit was evidently somewhat afraid, even before the wolf released its predatory aura. It jumped around uneasily in circles, attempting to leave the arena. It was this opportunity that the wolf seized to strike.

The wolf threw itself behind the rabbit with a single jump, biting down on the rabbit's rear end. However, there was armour protecting the backside of the rabbit as well, protecting its vulnerable anus. The bite of the wolf was strong enough to deform the lafite steel, but not enough to kill the rabbit.

The intense pain triggered the ferocious side of the rabbit, and it kicked hard enough at the wolf's head to leave an unexpected indent in its wake. It let out a beastly howl before jumping on the wolf, taking a large bit of its shoulder flesh. The wolf's own bestial instincts came into play, however, and it fought back.

The more attentive ones in the audience had already seen the Elementary Agility and Elementary Strength runes inscribed on the rabbit, but it still depended on its scales and armour. Lafite steel was the same material used in rune knight armour, but it was modified here to suit the strength and body of the rabbit. Even so, this was far superior to the natural fur and scales of other beasts, requiring the winter wolf to gnaw at it repeatedly before it wore away.

The rabbits Steven had bred were all as strong as hunting hounds, and this particular one was the best out of hundreds. That was why it could bear two runes on its body, its fighting ability actually slightly at an edge over the winter wolf for the very same reason. On top of that, its scales were bred to be resistant to cold, so the frost breath of the winter wolf was greatly weakened. For a moment, it seemed like both the beasts were equal in strength.

The Solams were all holding their breaths, and Steven was clutching tightly to the railing before him, sweating so much that his palms could slip out under him at any moment. Every bite the wolf took out of the rabbit made him shudder, like the damage was not to the rabbit's body but to his own.

The winter wolf was already a mess, a large amount of its flesh having been torn off by the rabbit's incessant attacks. However, its own bestial nature had been pushed to the extreme, its attacks more and more threatening. The contrast between the two creatures began to show, the pure predator that was the wolf dominating the rabbit who'd never hunted in its life. The rabbit was only biting and tearing to survive, but it didn't know at all what vital areas were. With only two generations of breeding it

was impossible to raise a species' intelligence significantly. Although some runes could indeed increase intelligence, those were all at least grade 4 with few runemasters able to make them. Even an alpha winter wolf wouldn't be able to bear that, let alone a snow rabbit.

The wolf was exhibiting its vicious cunning. It circled the snow rabbit, each of its attacks aimed at the latter's vital points. The neck, anus, abdomen and joints were all targeted, and as the wolf grew more familiar with the armour over battle it learned how to tear it apart and aim at the weaker areas. It even managed to rip out many of the rabbit's natural scales.

Although the wolf was bathed in wounds at this point, the injuries were pretty much all superficial. It hadn't weakened at all, while the rabbit already had one of its back legs bitten off so its movement was impeded greatly. Most of its armour, especially at the back, was also torn, revealing vital weak spots.

From this, many could already tell the outcome of this battle. As expected, the wolf ended everything by jumping onto the rabbit, using its weight to flip the smaller creature over and take a fatal bite of its tender abdomen.

"Aww!" Steven sighed in disappointment. The rabbit was still not a match for the wolf despite being mutated and having fangs. But he was also in relief, because the wolf was substantially injured as well. If the snow rabbits from both sides could not defeat the wolf, then the outcome would be judged based on the amount of injuries left behind.

Richard didn't have the kind of mutated snow rabbit the Solams had invested so heavily into, meaning it was impossible for it to carry two runes. If a rabbit with two runes couldn't beat a winter wolf, then it would be impossible for a rabbit with only one. Saint Klaus had already mentioned that it was impossible for a snow rabbit to beat a winter wolf with only elementary rune slots.

The injured wolf returned to its cage, whereas the carcass of the mutated rabbit was collected by the mages of Deepblue for further examination to ensure that all the runes on it were all made by Steven. After a clean-up, a new mature winter wolf was introduced to the arena. It was Richard's turn now.

Steven let out a sigh of relief as he saw this wolf, but also felt somewhat downcast. This wolf was almost identical to the one he faced in terms of size and strength, showing the Deepblue's impartial nature. He felt sad that Sharon's bias had its limits, and was unpredictable. It could be a source of light when he'd lost all hope, but it could also disappear when he was most expectant.

If a mutated rabbit was still alright, then why not give Richard an alpha wolf?

# Book 1, Chapter 59 - A Fateful Battle

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The creature Richard released was a snow rabbit as well, but less than a third the size of Steven's it was only a little larger than its domestic cousins. The difference between this particular snow rabbit and any other was that its torso was light brown in colour, the fur shed when it was implanted with runes. This showed that Richard's rune slotting still needed a lot of improvement, unable to fuse the rune into the creature's physical body perfectly. On the other hand, it also showed that the snow rabbit itself wasn't all that strong, the rune had to be implanted by force.

A collective sigh of relief spread out from the Solam camp once they saw the snow rabbit. How could such a weakling defeat a winter wolf? It was only Mountainsea that still rested her head in her hands, looking around the laboratory attentively without an ounce of worry or anxiety on her face.

Professor Fayr straightened up when he saw this snow rabbit, revealing a bewildered expression. Shaman Urazadzu opened his crusty eyes, sizing up the snow rabbit before he slowly shut them again. There was a slight smile on his face.

As for Sharon herself, she tilted her head and dozed off with her hands supporting her face. It looked like the trip hadn't been a lucrative one, and the legendary mage hadn't completely recovered yet.

The winter wolf caught the attention of the snow rabbit once Richard left the arena. It was a gutsy creature indeed— its fur stood up at the sight, and it started squealing at the canine.

Being provoked by such a weak being, the wolf went into attack mode with no hesitation. It let loose menacing deep howls, streamlining its body before jumping forward at the speed of lightning. With one bite, it sank its teeth into the snow rabbit.

However, the rabbit that wasn't scared of the wolf earlier didn't

resist in the least, taking the attack without doing anything. It grimaced in pain, trying to struggle, but the wolf had already lifted it off the ground. Any attempt of struggle was futile.

But just at that moment, the snow rabbit took in a deep breath with all its might. Its eyes turned from icy blue to blood red, its body inflating rapidly as its thick coat of fur couldn't withstand the glow of the flames within.

Boom! An explosion erupted in the middle of the arena, flames rising into the sky before morphing into a mushroom cloud that continued the ascent. They only dissipated when they reached the ceiling.

The dust cleared to reveal a distinct lack of a snow rabbit. However, the winter wolf's mouth was missing as well, and the upper half of its body was charred black. It took a few unsteady steps forward, but then suddenly fell head first to the floor. Its four limbs spasmed before they grew motionless.

Silence descended upon the laboratory. The sudden reversal of the outcome came far too suddenly. It took but a few moments from the start of the battle for the explosion to occur, and nearly nobody had expected such an outcome.

Richard stood by the laboratory, feigning a calm that could not conceal his feelings of pride. The legendary mage suddenly opened her once-closed eyes, her eyes turning to happy crescents as she blinked at him.

The silence was soon interrupted by a hysterical cry, "Cheating! He cheated!" The dragon warlock, despite being held back by his subordinates, was trying to climb over the railings to charge at Richard.

But Richard remained motionless; his eyes curved into two half slits exuding happiness. His left hand's fingers began moving subconsciously, and should the dragon warlock really charge forth he would find out what the true fighting techniques of the



underworld were. Steelrock stared at Richard's left hand, before looking at the dragon warlock who was resisting with all his might. His face revealed a sense of nonchalance as he deliberately and very obviously spat in the dragon warlock's direction.

The members of the Solam tribe pretended not to have seen Steelrock's actions, before a few warriors came forth to pin Steven down. A few mages were exchanging whispers, discussing the battle in hushed voices. Meanwhile, Minnie gazed at Richard blankly from the Solam seats, her face twisted with complicated emotions.

The Solams had turned into a mess, but the professors of the Deepblue remained sitting in their upright positions, not making any dramatic movements and only exchanging glances from time to time. At the same time, Mountainsea cemented her gaze onto Richard, neglecting anything else that appeared in her vision. However, having fixed her eyes onto Richard, Mountainsea's expression revealed an immense sense of longing, which she tried hard to suppress by maintaining her upright sitting posture, retaining the virtuous disposition that Norlanders were known to have.

Although a majority of the barbarian warriors hadn't been able to understand what happened, the change in expression of some of the palace guards implied they came to a certain realisation regarding things. The half-charred body of the wolf lay motionless in the middle of it all, with no chance of standing up once more.

"I won't accept this! He cheated!" Steven was in a frenzied rage, resisting with all the strength he could muster, making it hard for the four warriors holding him down to keep him there. He even went as far as to bite the arms of the warrior in front of him, but although the man flinched a little he wouldn't dare let go.

An old man dressed in common clothing stood up from the last row of the Solam seats, letting out a huge sigh before casting a sleep spell on Steven. The spell took full effect despite the dragon

warlock's resistance, sending him into deep sleep after a short struggle. The sheer effectiveness of the spell spoke volumes of how formidable this mage was.

The old man took a look at Steven before commanding, "Take him back." The Solam warriors took their leave, bringing the warlock out of the laboratory.

Only afterwards did he walk out of the Solam seats, bowing deeply to the distant Sharon in apology, "Forgive me, my family hasn't taught its children well. I hope you won't take it to heart."

Sharon yawned and barely opened her eyes. The effectiveness of the spell, albeit it being very top-notch, had not impressed her. Had she cast the same spell she would have sent all the Solam Family members here to sleep. She'd even have a near 50% chance of it working on Steelrock, a totemic warrior of the barbarian race. The only reason why Sharon had decided to be a little more formal was due to the old man's social standing and his respectfulness.

"Earl Fornon Solam... Why sneak in without a word of greeting? Were you afraid the competition wouldn't be fair?" she asked in a mocking tone.

Fornon was Duke Solam's younger brother, a powerful level 18 mage who controlled a formidable branch family himself. It was evident why he appeared in the Deepblue this time, requiring no extra explanation.

Earl Fornon let out a huge sigh, and looked at Richard with complex feelings, "No, the results were very fair. We did lose the competition. The rune that was attached to the snow rabbit's body was likely a self-destruction rune, that's a grade 3 rune condensed down to an elementary one. Even if it was only a third of the efficiency, that's already very close to being a true runemaster. The competition was a test of one's understanding of runes, and Richard managed to create his own while we only stuck to the standard. Regardless of whether he designed it personally, we've

failed the test.”

“I’m glad you think that way! There’s no need to be too devastated about it, it’s only one chance lost. There’s no lack of such with me,” the legendary mage revealed a dimpled smile, “Considering our long relationship, I can consider giving you another slot. The fees will be the same as before, only half of what a paying student would give. Of course, it won’t be in runecrafting. Hmm, how about this: I haven’t taken in any apprentices to train based on bloodline, perhaps you might want to take up that domain? A strong warlock is like a mobile cannon on the battlefield!”

Fornon’s face twitched a few times, before he thanked the legendary mage once more for her kind intentions and expressed his plans to discuss it with the duke before sending over a disciple with a bloodline to learn from the legendary mage. The Earl indeed had the demeanor of an aristocrat. Only after expressing his well wishes towards Richard once again did he lead the members of the Solam Family away.

Once the Solams left, Blackgold sighed deeply in regret. His gaze had been the same as Sharon’s as they watched Steven being taken away, reluctant to part with him. Not every student could burn money like the warlock did. Steven indeed had no fitting opponent in that domain. It was a pity that, even though Sharon offered to teach him as a warlock, the Solams had decided to cut their losses...

The grand mages entered the arena, beginning to clean up. They flipped the charred winter wolf carcass over, beginning a hushed discussion.

Eventually, Professor Fayr couldn’t help but stand forth and ask, “Richard. That rune you attached to the snow rabbit, did you simulate self-destruction or an implosion spell?” His voice was trembling just at the mention of the latter. Implosion was a grade 9 spell, something only the Solomon Family’s fifth grade set that was

passed on from generation to generation could recreate. Having asked the question, Fayr noticed how overly agitated he was as well. Even a simulated implosion would be at least grade 3, and the spell that Richard had implanted onto the snow rabbit was obviously just an elementary structure.

Richard suppressed his own agitation, slightly bowing towards the grand mages before answering like he was in a classroom. “I referenced self-destruction, but that’s not what gave rise to the explosion. There’s many kinks I have to iron out before I can recreate a grade 3 spell, so I actually just added three fireball spells into the rune, ignited by the vitality of the snow rabbit. Two of them had differing amounts of delay, so all three effectively burst forth at the same time. The life energy the snow rabbit could burst forth with on the edge of life and death triggered the effects of the rune.”

The explosion of three standard fireballs at the same time would have more than seventy degrees of power, definitely enough to fatally injure the winter wolf even if they didn’t hit a vulnerable area like the mouth of the creature. Only grade 2 runes could cast multiple spells simultaneously, however, and they weren’t something Richard could make now. Thus he’d decided to use the method with three fireballs and delays, but even so this wasn’t something an ordinary runemaster could do. Only someone with precise calculations like Richard was capable of this feat. Just the delays on two of the fireballs had taken him a good half month to complete, requiring lots of practice and luck to get it within the 0.2 millimetre window he had.

However, Richard’s words sent the mages into an uproar, and they couldn’t help but start speaking in hushed voices.

“Three fireballs with two delays, and the timing of the delays was controlled so accurately? How unexpected!”

“So many different spells in one elementary rune?”

“Is this really something Richard built?”

It was no surprise for so many of the mages to be shocked. Implanting so many spell structures in such a small rune was no easy task. Furthermore, the rune itself had been custom designed, and if Richard really was the one who came up with it he would face no obstacles on his path to becoming a grand runemaster. Grand runemasters were very esteemed people in the three kingdoms, and some of them were people even Sharon couldn't offend. There were runemasters amongst the mages as well, but they watched on in wonder at the birth of a legend.

Having heard Richard's explanation, Fayr nodded his head and sat down slowly. He said profoundly, “Richard, the creativity you've shown with this rune is quite commendable, and it has your style. But remember that the gates of power have only just been opened ahead of you, and there is a long way to go before you reach the peak. Only when you complete your journey can you have the last laugh. Things like self destruction are a last resort, something you shouldn't use in most other situations. Putting everything into offense is not the best choice.”

Richard smiled faintly. Fayr's words confused him a little, but they also touched him. Runes really were a two-way bridge: the runes he created would allow others to peer into his own self.

Fayr had said his piece, but Richard felt distinctly that there were others paying attention to him as well. Chief amongst them were Sharon and Mountainsea. He'd won this fateful competition, revealing for the first time his gift that could take him to the level of a grand runemaster.

However, this was but a small stop in the grand scheme of things in his heart. He knew the hatred between him and Steven wouldn't cease just yet. Just like he'd told Mountainsea, some animosity could never be forgiven.

# Book 1, Chapter 60 - Farewell

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Things returned to normalcy the day after the competition for Richard, except for one thing. This was the day he had to bid farewell to Mountainsea.

Several months of daily interaction had already deeply imprinted this girl into his heart. The day she was to leave, he accompanied her to the foot of the Everwinter Mountains as was tradition in mountain villages like Rooseland.

It was only when she was at the crossroads heading east that Mountainsea finally stopped in her tracks. Steelrock and the rest of the barbarians continued to drive the carriages ahead, only stopping a few hundred metres away to give the two some space alone.

“I’m leaving now; don’t miss me too much,” she finally spoke up for the first time in the journey.

“Don’t worry, I’ve always been able to control myself.” The conversation was awkward between the boy and girl, a byproduct of months of intimate contact.

“Why don’t you come with me, and be my man? We’ve already lived together for a few months— just one year and I’ll be able to make a decision. Don’t worry, I feel like I won’t throw you into the sea when the time comes.” Mountainsea tried to persuade Richard once again.

“No!” Richard firmly rejected, just as he always had. It was not an answer that required much thought, since every day in the past three months he had to reject her in the same way several times.

Mountainsea frowned. This was the only thing she had picked up from Sharon after spending tens of millions of coins in tuition fees.

“Richard... What could you even do if I carry you away right now?” The threat immediately silenced him. It was both real and

effective— even if he could produce runes now his defensive abilities were lackluster when faced with Mountainsea. That was how Mountainsea got her daily ‘gifts.’

He eventually replied with a forced laugh, “I know you think I suit you, but you’ll eventually be able to find someone more to your tastes.”

Mountainsea shook her head vigorously. “Even if there are, I wouldn’t be interested anymore. Come with me! The power of our sacred totems is much greater than your magic runes; you can study them for life!”

Richard laughed helplessly; he had answered the same question numerous times beyond count, yet all he could do was to shake his head resolutely every time. He had long given Mountainsea his answer. “I cannot leave with you, there are other matters that require my attention. You can pull me away by force, but you will never be able to get my consent.”

This time, Mountainsea fell silent as well, staring at Richard for a while. All of a sudden, Richard realised that there seemed to be something unclear in the pupil of her eye.

After a long pause, Mountainsea raised her hand to untie the string of animal ivory attached to her braid and placed it in his palm. The tooth in the middle was particularly large, with some holes carved on it. It looked to be a whistle.

“For you. Remember to keep it with you all the time, and don’t lose it,” she told him.

Richard looked back from the ivory to Mountainsea, and it suddenly seemed heavier in his hand. After some thought, he decided to wear it as a bracelet on his left wrist.

Seeing his actions, Mountainsea let out a tiny smile. “I know you Norland men all want to be stronger than your wives. If you want to dominate me according to Norland tradition, though... I can’t

see it happening at all. But that's okay; I'll wait for that day to come.

“Remember, blow into that whistle in the middle and I'll know, no matter where I am. If your life is in immediate danger one day, and you're about to be killed, I'll come and avenge you. If you decide you want to become my man, then just blow on the whistle as you step into mainland Klandor. I'll join you for the ultimate duel.”

Richard was completely at a loss for words. The only thing he felt was the ivory being as hot as fire, burning him so hard he almost couldn't catch his breath.

Mountainsea suddenly let loose a smile as bright as the sun, saying with a laugh, “If you fall down to my beating, I'll directly throw you into the sea!”

Mountainsea's laughter filled the air without a hint of pretense. Still, Richard grew even more solemn as the atmosphere relaxed.

“Now then, time for a present!” The girl approached Richard, rendering him practically helpless. He gave up on any resistance, but he didn't expect Mountainsea's actions.

She didn't go in for a passionate ‘kiss,’ instead giving him a long, deep hug.

“I'm off!” Mountainsea turned around right as she finished, taking large strides towards the barbarians' carriages in the distance. Her steps were heavy but firm; every single one making her look like a prehistoric giant that left everyone trembling in fear.

Speechless, all Richard could do was wave. And although Mountainsea didn't even turn around, she lifted her right hand and waved hard, as though there were eyes at the back of her head. Her shadow stretched towards him with the rising sun, almost as though she didn't go away at all...



The sun shone brightly above Floe Bay as usual the day after, the blue crescent moon faintly discernible on the horizon. The winds had turned chilly, and bits and pieces of ice started to float on the surface of the sea. There were fewer ships entering and leaving the harbour today, displacing less water as well. The ships that couldn't withstand iceberg impacts were almost gone, but the business in the harbour wasn't much different from usual. The number of ships able to plow through the ice had multiplied greatly ever since the midsummer festival.

To Richard the day was a brand new start, but just as much it was a continuation of the past. This day forth he could focus completely on exploring the world of runecrafting, but there wasn't much change to the actual rhythm of his life. His activities, tallied once a month in great chronological detail, still left the grey dwarf gasping for air trying to catch up.

As winter arrived, Richard finally made the first complete magic rune in his life. It was a standard Elementary Agility rune, the one he'd first made a breakthrough in. From the selection and processing of the material, to the production of usable components, every step in the creation of this rune slot was made by Richard alone, with no help from anyone else. Normal runemasters usually made use of ready-to-use processed materials to save time, but Richard started from scratch, all the way at the beginning where he cut the pelt.

The rune had taken two whole weeks to make, and by the end of it Richard had grown able to memorise the entire procedure by heart. Completing all the steps, he realised his understanding of runecrafting had been elevated once more.

This was a high-quality rune, able to improve agility by 41%. The magic formation this time was stable, expanding its range of use greatly. If it was slotted onto an armoured warhorse again, the horse wouldn't die to a lack of energy.

Any rune had three basic sections to it— a controller, a mana

supply, and the main magic unit itself. Most grade 1 and 2 runes relied primarily on absorbing energy from attached magic crystals, or using the life force or mana of its host itself. The first rune he'd tried to make had problems in the mana supply, leading to an excessive absorption of life force without anything to keep it in check. This led to the horse running about wildly, dying from exhaustion. Naturally, he would never commit such a mistake.

He'd redrawn the same formation he'd used then. Although there weren't any new things in the design, the pure precision of the rune this time was so terrifying it was nearly only possible in theory. Anyone who actually had an idea of the craft would likely break out in cold sweat if they saw this rune because of how closely it resembled the base draft.

The precision of the rune was so high that even Richard himself was not confident of making another copy again. Only after a long time, once his skill had increased significantly, would he be confident in stabilising at such a level of accuracy.

Honestly, Richard did not really understand the significance of his work, and only treated it as a practice piece from the get go. Thus, he did not pay much attention to it after completion, and just threw it directly to Blackgold for thirty thousand gold coins. On Norland, most standard elementary agility runes were priced between a hundred thousand to a hundred and fifty thousand coins. Just like he'd decided to long ago, Blackgold had ended up offering 20-30% of the market value.

# Book 1, Chapter 61 - Taking Flight

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Richard did not know what the market prices were like outside of the Deepblue, and even if he did he was not interested. At this moment he was simply overwhelmed with excitement. Although these few tens of thousands were completely insignificant in comparison to the cost of the resources he had used, this was the first sum of money which he had earned through his own effort!

Richard only indulged in the pleasure of receiving this additional income for a few more minutes before immersing himself back into endless work and learning. Blackgold, on the other hand, had put on his high-power magnifying glasses made of refined gold and thrown himself onto his work desk. Completely oblivious to the passing of time, he studied the rune that Richard had delivered meticulously, line by line.

Only when the room had turned completely dim did Blackgold suddenly realize that the sky was already dark. He then promptly proceeded to light seven to eight magical lamps which filled the room with light as bright as day before he jumped back onto his working desk, continuing to inspect the rune which he had only spent thirty thousand on.

Before he knew it, it was already daybreak. He let out a long breath and stood up, his growling stomach reminding him that he hadn't eaten for the past day and night. However, Blackgold couldn't care less as he searched wildly to retrieve a magic briefcase of the best quality. Carefully placing the rune inside, he left the Deepblue in a hurry.

At the end of the month, when Richard scanned through his bill as per usual, to his surprise he found an additional income entry of a huge amount of 800,000 gold titled 'Dividend from Auction of Rune'. This was on top of the 30,000 gold he'd received from selling the rune to Blackgold, as well as the gold from Sharon's Delight, which in total, accumulated to an astounding amount.

Richard tried hard to recall. He had only handed an Elementary Agility rune to Blackgold, and from his knowledge such a rune couldn't exceed 200,000 in price no matter what. Even if he'd exceeded the maximum 50% boost, it would still only be 200,000 coins. So how was it auctioned at a price so high such that even the dividend was worth eight hundred thousand coins? Moreover, this sum of income did not come from Sharon, but Blackgold. From Richard's understanding of the grey dwarf, he would never give all of his auction earnings to Richard. In fact, he would not give half or even a quarter of the earnings to him! This was merely Elementary Agility!

Yet, as Richard soon encountered a new tricky problem in his research on rune design, this matter was quickly tossed to the back of his mind. It was the grey dwarf who, on the other hand, took much greater interest in him. He checked up on Richard from time to time, often to inquire kindly whether he needed anything. The abnormality was evident in his behaviour, but Richard's attention was fully devoted to his problem which seemed almost impossible to overcome. As a result, it completely did not occur to him what the grey dwarf's behaviour could mean.

Richard still did not know that his copy of Elementary Agility had been auctioned at the Sacred Alliance for a sky-high price of 5 million! This was because it was unimaginably versatile in its adaptability, and had a boost range exceeding 35% of a standard rune of its type, allowing it to be attached onto many fourth-grade and even third-grade rune slots to combine into a compound rune. Such a compound rune would take up less space on a rune knight's body.

The more adaptable a rune, the less taxing it was on the capacity of a knight's rune slots. No rune could afford to exceed the maximum capacity, and a certain margin had to be set aside when crafting one. Thus, there was always a problem of wasting a part of the rune slots even with a custom-made rune. Additionally, the

higher the grade of the rune, the more of the capacity wasted. The sheer amount of wasted capacity from a few grade 4 runes would be enough to accommodate an elementary rune. The original conception of a compound rune was to maximize the usage of a rune knight's slots, in turn maximising their effectiveness in battle.

However, the adaptability and effectiveness of a rune were mutually exclusive. While a more adaptable rune wouldn't take up as much of the rune slot, it wasn't as powerful either. While there were runes in the market that could compare to Richard's standard in terms of adaptability, most of them only had a boost of about twenty percent, which was far below the standard boost of thirty percent. The value of Richard's rune was in the fact that it had a boost of up to 41%. With double the effectiveness of a similar rune, people were willing to pay fifty times the price.

Rune knights who were truly skilled could make use of the rune's adaptability to the fullest. If Richard could make a rune with a 42% boost, the price would reach six million instead. This was how things worked at the higher end of the market, prices increasing in geometric progression with the rarity of the object.

Richard still did not know of all these details, and he couldn't care less even if he did. He was much more farsighted than that, and would not falter simply for these meagre material gains right in front of him now. At the same time, Blackgold was an extremely reasonable grey dwarf who would stand firm by his principles. Even though he looked forward to more runes, he never pressed Richard for them.

Time crept by quietly. The Deepblue seemed to have kept to its status quo, except that the people living in here would age with every passing year. Spring had come and gone again, and it suddenly dawned on Richard the next spring that he was now fifteen years of age.

In Norland, adulthood began at fifteen years old. Richard was

now already a level 8 mage, and had just completed his last standard elementary rune last night. Now he had a grasp of all elementary runes, and only had to manufacture a single grade 2 rune before he could officially declare himself a runemaster. This was merely a matter of time, and it would not take long. In fact, if not for the fact that Richard insisted on learning all of the elementary runes first, he may have already been able to make second-grade runes.

More often than not, the legendary mage was still nowhere to be seen. Ever since she had met Mountainsea, she had been spending less and less time at the Deepblue. She was always travelling the boundless planes, and although nobody knew what exactly she was busy with it was most likely related to earning money in any case.

As time slipped by, spring was here again. Richard's birthday was coming up as well. The Day of Destiny would be here soon as well, the specific date never the same but still in the same general timespan. The power of destiny was only triggered by the tides of all seven moons in the sky at the same time.

On the night before the Day of Destiny, Richard suddenly felt that it was time for him to leave the Deepblue. Sharon still hadn't returned, and he had the slight feeling that she wouldn't until after he left.

On that day Richard packed his luggage, and informed Blackgold that he would be leaving. He was still unsure as to where he would go, but he believed he would have the answer once the Day of Destiny passed. Richard's intuition had grown sharper, an indication of his burgeoning mana reserves.

On that night, Richard didn't do anything for once. He just brewed a cup of tea like an aged man would, sitting wordlessly in front of the french window. He stared out, at Floe Bay, lit brightly under the seven moons, and reminisced about the last fifteen years of his life.

He'd had his fair share of joy and gloom. Not passing any judgement, he just thought back to the important moments of his life and nothing more. At fifteen years of age Richard had the wisdom of someone ten years his senior, and the sentiment of one ten older than that.

When the first ray of morning light shone onto the surface of the sea, the seven crescents disappeared behind the mountains one after the other. The Day of Destiny had passed, but little did anyone know how many fates had been changed that night.

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An eagle suddenly spread its wings and rose into the sky from the Everwinter Mountains, flying across the vast Floe Bay before disappearing far and beyond into the horizon. A pair of bottomless eyes caught sight of the eagle's figure, waves of emotion stirring within the pools of red so thick it resembled blood.

This was a towering knight with a brawny figure practically comparable to a barbarian warrior. He was clad in heavy black armour that appeared to be worn out, with fuzzy patterns of mottled crimson on the body. The helmet was covered with chops and stab marks, making for a ghastly sight, making it such that people would hardly dare imagine the sheer number of life-or-death battles this armour had accompanied its owner through. Many of the thick thorns on the shoulders, arms, and knees were already blunt, not having been polished or repaired. This set of full body armour was designed to cover its owner completely from head to toe, and from the protruding edges it seemed like it was five millimetres thick. The entire set would be astonishingly heavy.

Yet, the knight's movements were not affected in the least, as though the set of heavy armour weighed nothing at all. Every move of his seemed to radiate a fog of blackish-red blood vitality from its gaps, something that the armour absorbed back immediately after. With this cycle, it seemed like the knight was

covered in heavy red mist.

The horse the knight was sitting on was of great stature as well, about half a fold taller than the regular warhorse. Its huge body was covered with black heavy armour, the skirt hanging down to the knees of the horse's legs. As its iron hooves galloped along, one could see the light gold of magic symbol on them faintly.

Right now, the warhorse was reined in to a stop by its master. It was digging around the ground impatiently using its iron hooves. Every kick disintegrated the green rocks nearby to pieces.

The knight raised his head slightly and watched as the eagle flew further away before he smiled thoughtfully. He lifted his helmet to reveal a chiseled face, with dark red hair and a stiff, bristle-like moustache. If not for the fact that the devil accessory on the front of his chest armour had already been marred by countless strikes and was beyond recognition, many would surely be able to recognise his identity from the head carved upon it. This was the leader of the thirteen knights who followed Gaton Archeron into Faust— Mordred.

As though he felt the impatience of the warhorse, Mordred patted it lightly on the neck. The ferocious and brazen beast let out a long neighing sound, trotted on his hooves and continued forward with steady ease.

Ahead of Mordred, the Deepblue was already growing visible on the horizon.



# Book 1, Chapter 62 - Journey

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Richard left the Deepblue as soon as the calendar flipped to the first day of April, taking all his luggage with him. The spring wasn't all that cold, and the refreshing winds felt soft and cool when they blew against his body as he headed east, towards the border roads of the Sacred Alliance.

The sideroads to the Everwinter Mountains twisted here to face north, continuing alongside the main road which itself was wide enough for four horse carriages to travel side by side. They headed deep into the Sacred Alliance.

Reining in the warhorse, Richard turned back. Far in the distance the spectacular constructions of the Deepblue had faded out into the indistinct fog, leaving only its elegant pointed tip flickering in and out of existence above the clouds and mist. Buried under that thick fog was Floe Bay, whilst the Everwinter Mountains' snowy peaks penetrated through the mist, standing tall in the sky.

What he'd left behind in the Deepblue was not just five years of his life, but countless precious memories as well as a remaining debt of over twenty million gold coins. He viewed all of Sharon's Delight as debts, which he would definitely return to the legendary mage in the future. In the last two years, Richard had successfully earned over six million gold coins through selling magic runes to Blackgold and returned part of his 'debt'. While the grey dwarf had no idea why Richard was so persistent in this, he more than welcomed it, especially when Richard never argued about the huge difference in the selling and buying prices.

Even if there came a day where Richard repaid all of his debts, Sharon's Delight would forever remain a precious memory to him, worth far beyond just thirty million.

"It's time to go, Richard," Mordred's voice sounded from the front, interrupting the myriad of thoughts running through his

mind.

Richard sighed internally and urged the warhorse on, catching up to move alongside Mordred. Mordred gazed at his warhorse and nodded with approval, “That’s a fairly good horse.”

Richard was currently riding a specialty of Floe Bay, an armoured warhorse. This was a species they’d nurtured for over three generations, and they’d dulled the violent streak of its wild cousins without damaging its valiance.

Richard’s horse, however, was obviously much taller and larger than the common armoured warhorse and was only one size smaller than Mordred’s own mount. The horse was clearly feeling uneasy, but under Richard’s control, it managed to move alongside Mordred’s steed. In Mordred’s eyes, any horse that could get close to his ‘Lava’ and not collapse was a good horse. Unlike ordinary warhorses, Lava was carnivorous.

During numerous battles of life and death, Lava had always been the first to seriously injure, kick or even bite the opponent’s mount to death, allowing Mordred to achieve the upper hand and kill the opponent cleanly in one go. Hence, a fair number of powerful magic beasts had fallen under Lava, and like Mordred Lava emanated a bloody aura at all times.

Richard sat comfortably on his horse, seemingly unperturbed by the bloody aura radiating from Mordred. Now a true youth, his body had grown and though a part of him now looked like Gaton, he was more handsome in the same way the silvermoon elves were. Only the constant slight smile, plastered on his face, concealed that his thoughts did not belong to either Elaine nor Gaton.

Mordred looked at Richard’s sharp features through his side profile and smiled in satisfaction. Being able to linger by his side without concern meant that Richard would not make a fool of himself in the bloody battles that were to come.

While studying with Naya, Richard had seen him torture others not just once. Interrogations more bloody and terrifying than the one with Blood Parrot were not few in number. By the third time, Richard no longer needed the wooden bucket and after the fifth, he began to help Naya out. After the eighth time, he'd even possessed enough strength to clean up the kitchen at the back on Naya's behalf! Compared to the smell from Naya's kitchen, Richard did not even seem to notice the bloodiness arising from Mordred. Despite this, however, Mordred's endless bloodlust was something Naya could never match up to.

When he had gone to Rooseland to retrieve Richard and Elaine, Mordred had brought with him a middle-ranked, heavily armoured group of knights along with two light cavalry. Now, five years later when collecting Richard from the Deepblue, he had only brought two knights to accompany them.

Two rune knights, that is. These rank 2 rune knights were only slightly weaker than the entire troop Mordred had brought to Rooseland in the past. Even two brigades would have to spend a lot of time and effort to take them out.

The small group of four people and five mounts slowly travelled further into the boundless land between the mountains and seas, the extra mount carrying the small luggage they had between them.

To be honest, there were many methods of long-distance travel on Norland. With enough money, trained two-legged wyverns and griffins would be a good option to carry people along fixed routes. The physically larger moslan two-headed eagle was also known for its great endurance and ability to fly three thousand kilometres within a day and night. In addition, the dwarves' famous Floating Vessel was a miracle created by alchemical techniques and contained a very comfortable interior within the flying machine. However, the danger and cost of the products of alchemy were several times higher than taming beasts, rendering this method

unfavourable in comparison.

Going along the waters was also a pretty good option if you were unwilling to bear the wind pressure along with the cold and weightless feeling that came with travelling through the skies. This option included large ships powered by magic, which could travel distances over a thousand kilometres everyday along with tamed masha baleen whales', able to travel about the same distance, but in a bumpier journey.

With the Archeron Family's current strength and status, Richard would have been able to hire enough griffins to ferry them between the Deepblue and Faust a couple times with the money he had on hand. Only when away from the Deepblue did gold seem to have gold's worth.

Rather than a journey which could be completed within a week by riding a griffin, Mordred had instead prepared to travel the length via horseback. This way, there would be numerous dangers and the length of the trip would be extended to around a month. In Richard's perspective this month lost was very precious, and its worth could not be measured through money. He was now very proficient in creating elementary runes, and with arduous study, he could still continue with the practice of creating the most basic elementary agility rune and even create two in one month. Subtracting the costs of the materials, earning a few hundred thousand gold coins would not have been an issue at all.

Hence, Richard had voiced his dissent to Mordred regarding this from the very beginning, but Mordred had said that this was Gaton's decision.

Faust was over seven thousand kilometres away from the Deepblue as the crow flies, and taking into consideration the limited terrain one could cross on horseback that distance more than doubled to over fifteen thousand. They would have to travel through mountains, forests, rivers, and huge uninhabited areas full of various dangers. They would even have to pass through ten

or so territories that belonged to families harboring malicious intent towards the Archerons. In light of this, one could definitely foresee that there would be many battles along the way. Gaton wished for Richard to be trained through constant battles, so he could gain battle experience and learn how to coordinate with rune knights and other heavily armoured melee troops, especially since he knew the boy was a budding mage.

In other words, by the time Richard entered Faust, Gaton hoped that he would already be equipped with some battle experience.

# Book 1, Chapter 63 - Journey

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Indeed, Richard's destination was the legendary city of Faust.

There was a certain kind of magic to time. When Richard had left the Blackrose Castle five years ago, entering Faust was but a thought in the mind of the daring lunatic called Gaton. Now? The Archerons were already an official member of the city.

The bards of the Sacred Alliance always spoke of the exciting experiences of the many families that tried to enter Faust. These families prepared meticulously for over a hundred years, and even then they still needed well-recognised heroes to lead them as they tore down various barriers on a journey of blood and fire with their very lives on the line to step foot into Faust and settle down there. Every family currently in Faust had such an epic behind it.

But Gaton had changed everything. He compressed a hundred years of preparation into a mere three, and changed what would be a magnificent ballad into a zealous aria.

Richard was currently fifteen years of age, and could now be considered a true runemaster. Although Gaton seemed indifferent to this on the outside, he had long sent Mordred to bring the boy to Faust. He had plans for his son's future, and the arrival of Mordred in the Deepblue signified that he was thoroughly aware of Richard's progress. On the other hand, Richard had come to know more about his father in the past years, growing levels past his confused former self.

Gaton setting the place of their meeting to Faust wasn't as simplistic as it seemed. Entering the city of legends was only the beginning; every family there had only been given a ticket to participate in the game of power and authority within the city. A long path awaited them if they wished for their voice to be heard at the highest echelons of Norland.

Any new clan that successfully entered Faust would be

discriminated against and ambushed for the next ten years or so. Even though the same skirmishes occurred between established families as well, it was at least in secret ways that wouldn't affect their reputation. This was why many successful families had a handful of influential allies within the city of legends, to help them through the challenging phase that came after they were severely wounded during their entry.

In the past 400 years, 53 families and clans had embarked on a journey to Faust, with only 21 succeeding. And yet, the number of clans actually within Faust still remained at a constant 14. Richard wasn't sure if his father had any allies, but there were certainly more enemies than one could count. The situation the Archerons faced when they first entered Faust could be described as mass abhorrence; everyone they met or passed was an enemy. Two years had passed since then, and in theory the Archerons should have been in their most difficult phase but Gaton surprisingly managed to send his best knight—who extravagantly brought along two rune knights—to escort Richard. This was proof that he had already steadied his status in Faust.

And to Richard, this news was both good and bad.

The first day after they left the Deepblue, they set out even before the sun rose and only stopped advancing when dusk fell. The only meal they had was some bites of rations, along with some cold water that they'd carried on the spare horse. A ten-hour journey had taken them over 300 kilometres away from the Deepblue, with the resting site Mordred had prepared beforehand nearby.

It was a small, unknown town, but rather prosperous due to the road that connected them to the neighbouring empire. There were less than 100 families in the town, but it strangely had six inns which was clearly the main source of their income.

Riding a horse gets fairly tiring after long periods of time. When the horses walked onto the firm and even ground of the town,

Richard showed signs of exhaustion on his face. Yet he remained alert, and seemed to have energy left over. The armoured warhorse was a beast meant for short bursts of power, but this day-long trek didn't seem to faze it either as its steps were still steady and it looked rather spirited.

Mordred and the two rune knights looked the same as they did in the morning, apart from some dirt and dust that had settled on them. They were physically trained to be able to run at their highest speed whenever a situation called for it, so this journey was a piece of cake for them. But the two rune knights now looked at Richard with a newfound admiration, and Mordred praised him, "That's a pretty good horse there, Richard. And you too!"

They all knew Richard was only a level 8 mage, technically supposed to be quite frail. Mages weren't exactly weak with their bodies, still considerably stronger than regular humans, but they couldn't compare to warriors. Even if a mage's body also grew stronger with level Richard was only level 8 at the moment, his limited mana making it difficult to sustain magic like Bull's Strength and Agility of the Breeze that would increase his energy. It was unlikely for him to have harnessed additional strength through magic.

Because of time and other reasons, half of their day's journey had been off the main road, going through a shortcut filled with hills and streams. The road was extremely bumpy, so Richard was supposed to be worn out without any enhancing magic. The fact that he was showing this level of energy even now implied that his body was much stronger than peers of his level.

One of Mordred's intentions in this trip was to strengthen Richard's physique and willpower on top of his combat ability, but it seemed like the original 300 kilometres he'd planned for a day had underestimated the boy. It wasn't all that strange for Richard to be so strong, after all the care and nurture of the legendary mage left all of the Deepblue's mages as strong as bears, but how did his



horse have such endurance?

Mordred took another look at it and something caught his eye. “Richard, you added a rune to this horse?”

“Yes. It’s an elementary rune that can reduce energy consumption and increase regeneration. It’s called Vitality.”

“Vitality? I don’t think I’ve heard of it?” Mordred asked in confusion. As a high-levelled rune knight, although he did not know how to make runes his knowledge of them was comparable to that of an ordinary runemaster.

“It isn’t a standard rune, instead something I designed after some reading on both magic and divine spells.” Richard drew up the sleeve of his right arm and revealed a complicated yet graceful motif on his bicep, “Look, I gave myself one too. This allows me to regenerate faster.”

“Why not something that can increase your fighting strength, like those that can enhance your attacks with magic?” Mordred furrowed his brows.

“That’s for the future,” Richard answered, “Vitality gives me more time and energy to learn and practise magic, which will grow my power more in the long run. I’ll consider runes that increase my combat abilities when my body can handle more rune slots in the future.”

Mordred stroked his needle-like beard and laughed, “You don’t behave like a fifteen-year-old, do you?”

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Richard raised his head and gazed at the night sky before replying, “But there are a lot of 15 year-old Archerons who behave like me, aren’t there?”

Mordred did not keep his laughter in this time round, as he carried Richard off the horse and gave him a pat on his back almost strong enough to swat him into the mud before roaring, “You’re overthinking things! There really are a lot of intelligent fifteen-year-old Archerons, but that’s all there is to them. When master was 15 he was rather silly himself, and there were tons of kids smarter than him. Look where they are now, the clever ones are nowhere to be seen!”

Richard’s eyes lit up, “You’re talking about Gaton Archeron?”

“Yes, your father!” Mordred corrected.

“It’s Gaton Archeron, right?” Richard repeated his question.

“Alright, alright, it’s him.” Mordred shrugged before saying, “You Archerons are really weird beings.”

“So, you meant?” Richard continued to probe.

“It’s simple. You’re already quite outstanding amongst the fifteen-year-olds of the family, but the tables might turn when you reach sixteen. The one who laughs last will always be the best, so first you’ve gotta make sure to stay alive till you’re sixteen, kid! That’s also why Master wanted me to lead you into a few battles along the way. Faust isn’t known only for its wealth, prosperity, and women!”

Before Richard could say anything, Mordred took the chance to continue, “Alright kid, you have to seize the time now to eat and sleep. Since you have that strange ‘Vitality’ rune now, we have to make some changes to the plan. Tomorrow’s journey will be 700 kilometres!”

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Cloudy skies, rainy skies, and clear skies. The weather continued to cycle around as time elapsed. A month had passed within the blink of an eye, and Richard's party was close to reaching Faust.

The world is complicated, and accidents happen to the smartest of people. Neither Gaton nor Mordred expected the old enemies of the family to be so... restrained. None of them had picked a fight or provoked Mordred, smiling and gritting their way through it when he took his fully equipped rune knights through their territories or even stepped foot in their castles. They didn't respond to any of his provocations for a fight, and that left him speechless.

Although Mordred was blood-thirsty and adored killing, he wasn't a rascal without morals. How could he initiate any form of attack when all people did was smile at him and some even offered to let their personal demon blacksmiths to check the hooves of Lava when he accidentally knocked over their important monuments? He could only leave and give them a bag of gold coins as compensation for the monuments he destroyed.

So Richard did not actually engage in any fights throughout their journey to Faust. The only things he did kill were passing beasts.

Richard did not take part in any anticipated battle all the way until Lava stepped foot onto the ground of the Eternal Plains. It seemed like the reputation—no, the infamy— of the Archerons had already spread throughout the Sacred Alliance. Nobody wanted to face these madmen alone, without sufficient benefits and a steady ally.

The Eternal Plains were the territory of the legendary city. This meant there were no more chances for them to face danger now—immediate danger, at least. The plains were gentle and smooth, the horizon stretching farther into the sky than Richard had ever seen before. The plateau was decorated with mahogany rocks, and shy grasses peeked through the cracks with innumerable colourful

flowers adorning them. The explosion of colour was a feast to the eyes.

Richard stopped his horse and raised his head. The strong winds blowing strongly in his direction made him feel a little suffocated, but another thing that took his breath was the exceptional scenery before him. Looking at it, Richard felt as if he could see almost the entire plain at once.

The total area of the Eternal Plain wasn't actually big, its circumference a mere hundred kilometres, but it was more like a giant platform that rose within Norland. As small as it was, it wasn't something that could be viewed completely in one shot. Anyone who did get a full view of it would immediately feel suffocated!

There is power within space. Even Richard, who was used to seeing indoor spaces thousands of square metres in area was awestruck by the current view in front of him. He felt a sudden compulsion to stop himself from getting lost, holding his breath and furthering his line of sight bit by bit before he saw a mountain peak resembling a fiery red pillar at the very end of his vision. This disrupted his sense of space and distance, and because of that the numbers describing the scarlet peak in his mind didn't correspond to what he was seeing. It was an error that was driving him insane!

It was said that blessings would be given to first-time visitors of the miracle-filled Eternal Plains, and they would gain the ability to be able to look at every corner of the plains. Richard finally knew for himself now that the legend was true. The feeling of receiving the blessing wasn't as good as he thought, but it was still exciting.

This fiery red peak was the Miracle Peak that sustained Faust. The mountain was surrounded by an extremely thin line—almost not distinguishable to the eye—that led upwards. That was the path to the peak, and the peak was actually hidden in the clouds! There was a mass of clouds covering the peak, pure and white, moving slowly and gracefully as if with a life of their own. They

were never swayed even by the strongest of winds.

However, Richard saw something looming within those divine clouds. He was shocked beyond words as he rubbed his eyes and tried to look as far as he could and he finally realised that it was a floating island! There were mountains and streams and vegetation on the island, and he even saw buildings, each unique to their own.

“Is— Is that...” Richard pointed at the island within the clouds, and was rendered speechless.

“That is the Floating Island, where all fourteen acknowledged families of Faust live. When I first saw it, I couldn’t believe my eyes either. But at the time when I was fighting alongside your father in Faust, and we didn’t sleep for around 6 months. I can’t remember how many battles I’ve been in or how many people I’ve killed. When we finally arrived at the Eternal Plains, I was dead beat and only wanted to find a place to sleep, so how could I have any strength left to appreciate things like this? I was thinking that since we were already here, it’s only a matter of time that we make it up there.” Mordred watered down their epic advance to Faust to a few dull and ordinary sentences, but his natural arrogance and dominance still seeped through his words.

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“Alright, it’s time for us to go. You’ll have plenty of time to look at all this later,” Mordred waved dismissively as he urged Lava to move forward towards Miracle Peak. Richard managed to suppress his awe and follow suit.

The party took an entire hour to reach the foot of the peak, and only at such close proximity did the five-kilometre-wide and three-kilometre-tall mountain truly show its awe-inducing magnificence. It was impossible for any humans to take in the beauty of the vast landscape all at once, and one had to continuously turn and adjust their viewpoint to look at the different areas, be it the peak or the pathway to the top.

The thin line they’d just seen leading to the mountain peak now revealed itself to be a wide passageway that could accommodate four large carriages side by side. The road was paved in slabs of uneven rock, but they all strangely fit together without any cracks in between. One could see dense granules on the seemingly smooth surface if they looked hard enough, intended to prevent the wheels of carriages from slipping. The edge of the pathway was lined with a steel railing, and barriers topped with metallic beast heads that seemed truly alive. There was a strip of raised stone in the middle of the path, painted yellow to distinguish opposing traffic.

Richard tilted his head upwards, his vision following the pavement. Looking from where he was, even if he craned his neck to the maximum he would only be able to see the thick clouds that surrounded the peak. It was hard to imagine or even think about the island that lay above. Nonetheless, his mathematical ability did not fail him, as he calculated the total length of the pathway from the gradient. However, just how much did they have to spend for a pathway of such a length when every piece of brick and every barrier here was so meticulously crafted? It was an incomprehensible sum of money for Richard. He only ever felt this

way when he tried to calculate the construction costs of the Deepblue in the past. And yet, this was only the path to the city of legends.

“Hey Richard, look there!” Mordred’s voice sounded out, and Richard’s eyes flitted to the direction the older man was pointing to. There he saw a mass of peculiar-looking buildings, about one kilometre away. The most prominent characteristic of these buildings was their flat roofs, upon which griffins landed every now and then to build up momentum before taking off. They flew about for a while, before going higher towards the clouds that enveloped the peak.

Most of the time they only carried a person or two, flying alone. But there were some groups that carried crowds up, painting a rather awe inspiring image as the entire pack spread their marvellous wings all at once and darkened the sky as their majestic hoots resounded. One could hear those yells from far away.

“This is the griffin stop. You can get on one to go up or down the mountain for convenience, but do take note that won’t allow you to bring your own ride along. On the other end of the hill, there’s also two wyvern stops and morsehill hawk stops. But then, the people of Faust have a strong distaste for the smell of dragons so the wyverns can only be used to transport goods. Anyway, it’s time to go up, so follow me closely. It’ll be a long journey, so add some more magic to your horse while you can.”

Lava growled lowly and started making its way up when Mordred gave the ferocious beast a pat on its neck. Although the road was wide, it was still relatively crowded due to the high traffic of other knights and carriages sending goods. Surprisingly, many of the knights they saw along the way were rune knights, some making Mordred and party pale in comparison.

When their horses finally stepped into the clouds, Richard could feel a faint sense of magic in the air. The flow of mana was cryptic, but if one put their heart into it, it was still detectable. It formed

invisible, condensed threads of energy. When Richard decrypted the purpose of these threads, it shocked him— these were actually part of a spell formation! If every part of the clouds was filled with these threads, how big was the spell formation exactly?

“Look out! The door to Faust is right in front of you!” Mordred’s voice travelled over to Richard from higher up the clouds. Richard gathered his thoughts again, speeding his horse up as he detoured around the path. He found himself having entered a large field.

With no clouds disturbing his vision anymore, the horizon instantly widened. He found that he’d come to a large field that was about a kilometre in perimeter, made out of bronze rock that even he couldn’t tell the origin of. Judging from the fact that their horses failed to leave even the tiniest of scratches on the surface, however, it was clear that this material was quite tough. The entire area was a light gold, with numerous veins dotting it coloured a mixture of navy and deep green. These lines resembled runes and spell symbols, and seemed to be making up a giant spell formation. Richard couldn’t tell the constituents of this rock either, and he was also unable to feel any trace of mana flow from the giant spell formation.

Richard had a gut feeling that he was stepping on a spell formation, but this was something he hadn’t learnt about before. Not only was it different from the conventional spell formations he knew of, he couldn’t even understand the meaning of the individual symbols of it. This spell formation was impossible to explain using what he knew of magic theory.

His attention was soon caught by two huge sculptures at the centre of the field. They were each a hundred metres tall, depicting warriors holding onto swords with their faces covered by cloaks. The swords within their hands were plain and simple, only that there were two peculiar runes— both navy in colour— in the middle of the blade. They were bowed slightly, as if saluting a supreme being somewhere. Although these were merely lifeless



sculpture, he could feel their sincerity bursting forth. And somehow, Richard could feel a vague sense of power and killing intent from these sculptures.

Behind the sculptures were two pillars, both a hundred metres tall as well, with the space between them bridged by a domed roof. Be it the pillars or the roof, they were both made of the same rocks used to build the arena, with the same magical veins of navy and green around them that he couldn't understand. However, no matter how close Richard observed these constructs, he couldn't find any point with cracks that indicated the joint between two rocks. What exactly did this suggest? Were the two sculptures of warriors and the pillars behind them all carved from a perfect big piece of rock?

Who was it exactly that had the ability to sculpt such a phenomenal piece?

Richard found it hard to breathe again. He closed his eyes, attempting to empty the thoughts from his head till there was nothing but white space. He then gradually opened his eyes to gaze at the domed roof of the arched door. At the centre was the name of Faust, engraved by the same spells used elsewhere throughout Norland. Other than the fact that the name of the city was carved by magic spells, Richard could not find any other evidence of the link between this humongous arched door and the city of legends.

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There were thick chains coiled around the domed roof, falling down to suspend a large dragon head. The head was a deep black, covered in numerous pricks and thorns that was eerie despite the lack of life in the beast. This dragon seemed to have died a long time ago, and unlike ordinary members of its species it had a dozen eyes of varying sizes and a twisted mouth with hundreds of fangs. Richard knew at first look that this was no common beast, instead a demonic dragon from the abyssal planes. Judging from its size and strength, only the primordial dragons he'd heard of in folklore could compare.

Slaying the Abyssal Dragon Daramore was the best achievement of the Sacred Alliance's founder, Emperor Charles. It also spoke of the unprecedented military success of the human invasion of the abyssal planes. When Emperor Charles was the ruler, he'd gathered a millions-strong army from across dozens of planes to aid him in overturning the abyss. It took a month just to get the main troops into the Abyss, with more than thirty million soldiers participating. The bravest of warriors had laid down their lives to give their emperor and his seven best generals a chance to fight to the core of the Abyss. There they killed the dragon in one strike, bringing its head back to Norland and hanging it at the gates of Faust as a proof of their unrivalled power.

Emperor Charles had died a mere year after his conquest, but Daramore's head was passed down from generation to generation. It would be the spiritual pillar for humanity: as long as they reigned in the city of legends, the dauntless children of each generation would go forth and explore the depths of the myriad planes to forge their own legacies.

Behind the enormous arch was a road leading upward to the famed capital, a beautiful city lying atop the mountain.

Behind the verdant green of the uneven mountainscape was a

city of light gold. The sunlight fell on it rather gently, highlighting the gorgeous decoration of every visible part of the city. The roof, the walls, even the streets themselves all seemed untainted, like it was some sort of wonderland.

Floating islands of varying size were moving across predetermined trajectories in the incomparably clear sapphire sky. There was a certain stillness here, one that gave the bizarre feeling that space and time were frozen in this place.

The seven colours of the rainbow arced across the sky, one from each moon. If it weren't for the daylight, Richard would have thought that the seven moons of Norland were right there in that arc.

Richard had grown uniquely sensitive to the seven moons after the ceremony to Alucia when he turned ten. He actually felt a faint presence of moonforce when he saw the seven moons on that arc. It was vague, almost unnoticeable, but most definitely real.

Even as Richard was revelling in his new discovery, Mordred pulled him out of his reverie with a loud question, "How is it? Spectacular, right? I was awestruck too, when I first arrived here with your father. I wouldn't have believed such a place existed in the world if I hadn't seen it for myself. Right, since you're a mage it's best not to look at the Rainbow of the Moons. There were mages in the past who didn't know about this taboo and stared at the moons for too long. Their bodies ended up lighting on fire, and they ended up burnt to death. There are a handful cases like these every year!"

Richard was shocked upon hearing that. He'd felt the individual power of the seven moons stirring the magic within him just now, but he felt like he wouldn't be set ablaze like what Mordred had described earlier if he continued to look at the rainbow.

Mordred smiled again before saying, "Follow me, Little Richard! I'll show you some interesting things that get your adrenaline

pumping!”

There was a lot of traffic here, after all this was the main road connecting to the city of legends. Mordred’s unruly behaviour and loud voice attracted a lot of unwanted attention in a short period of time, but nobody actually stopped him. Of course most didn’t bother to hide their annoyance either, glaring daggers at the fellow. It was only after Mordred urged Lava, whom they’d picked back up from the stable, to move forward and away from the masses that these people started their endless venomous discussions, disdain and derision lacing their every word.

Faust was a brilliant and glorious city of legends, and fierce knights who reeked of blood like Mordred seemed relatively out of place indeed. Both he and Richard heard every comment the people made about him, but he only laughed them off and didn’t take the nonsense to heart. He took Richard through the entrance of Faust, straight to a pretty and exquisite field east of the entrance.

Richard shuddered right as they passed through, raising his head in a bodily response to look at the dragon head above him. Right at the moment they passed he felt like one of the dragon’s eyes moved, but nothing out of the blue happened and the head remained stagnant just like it had for the several centuries it had been prior.

Mordred took him all the way to the edge of the field before jumping off Lava and passing it to a youth standing nearby. The horse was extremely intelligent despite its poor temper, and obediently followed the arrangements of its owner as it tailed the youth to a stable specially made for mounts at the side of the field. However, a huge commotion broke out the moment it entered, and all the other mounts retreated to the corners like their lives depended on it. Even a huge armoured polar bear jumped to the side with an agility antithetic to its impressive size, leaving a vacancy in the centre. Lava stepped into that emptied space,

staying there quietly and letting out heaving breaths every once in a while that were enough to scare the already-frightened mounts once more.

Richard looked at Lava with overflowing envy. He was a runemaster, and naturally knew that the mount was a critical portion to creating a rune knight. Judging from things, it was likely that Lava contributed a significant amount to Mordred's strength.

"Richard! Here!" Richard got off his horse as well under Mordred's urging, walking towards him and looking in the direction he pointed.

This was a magical model of Faust, meticulous down to the finest of details. Even the floating islands and the Rainbow of the Moons were detailed intricately, floating alongside the city itself atop a sizeable magic crystal and moving along the same trajectories as their real counterparts.

Richard saw it clearly this time around. The floating islands were positioned according to certain rules, in a total of seven layers according to the height of their flight. The first layer, the topmost one, had a single island which was the biggest of the bunch. The second had two smaller ones, and the third had three, and so on until the seventh layer which was even lower than Faust's foundations. Additionally, those islands closer to Faust even within the same layer were bigger and their construction seemed more luxurious and beautiful.

Richard pored over every detail, seeing many family and clan names as well as magic seals of their emblems on the floating islands. On the third island of the seventh layer was the symbol of the Archerons. Given their innate weakness as a 'family' the Archerons had diverged into dozens of different emblems over the years, and they were still multiplying in number. However, there were two essential constituents to all Archeron emblems: flames, and devils. Gaton was the only one who had volcanoes and devils.

“Richard, that floating island is your father’s territory. It’s third in the seventh layer, and I think you can see for yourself at this point the higher the trajectory the bigger the island. And islands closer to the centre are bigger as well. Clans that are able to step foot into Faust are all ranked, and the islands represented their rank. There are currently four clans behind us in Faust.”

“What’s the significance behind the rankings?” Richard asked.

“The significance is huge. Firstly, it decides the frequency and amount of time every clan can enter and stay in the Church of the Eternal Dragon every year. In addition there’s a fixed number of clans that can enter Faust. Whenever a new clan successfully enter the city, the clan that ranked last would have to exit Faust and have their place replaced. This is why when a new clan tries to enter Faust, the current clan ranking last will fight to the death. It’s a battle deciding their fate, so even the other clans lend some measure of assistance.

Richard thought of a question, “Won’t the new clan need to quickly prepare themselves for battles with other clans who are also trying to enter Faust? But isn’t the new clan badly injured after successfully entering? How will they be able to hold up through more fights?”

Mordred nodded in agreement, “Yes, that’s why the first ten years after entering Faust is the toughest period.”

Richard frowned and pointed at the island that belonged to the Archerons, “But we’re not last?”

“That’s because we took down two clans when we entered Faust! Your father was impatient, so he cleared out the clan who was originally on the third island and made it his own. This lets us not worry about battles for a while. As for the ones we cleared out, it’s just too bad that they placed their strongest men and elites to block our journey.”

Richard did not know what to feel about Mordred’s words.

However, he knew that he still had many things to understand and familiarise himself with.

And at this moment, Mordred let out a sudden and cunning laugh. “Little Richard, make a guess now. Where does our venerable emperor, ‘Bloodthirsty Phillip,’ lives?”

Richard scanned through the place and his eyes landed on the massive palaces located on the highest mountain of Faust, “Here?”

“That’s the Church of the Eternal Dragon.” Mordred shook his head and pointed to the fourth island of the fifth layer. “This, is where the palace of our greatest emperor is!”

“Oh?” Richard was shocked. “That’s just the fifth layer! There are clans stronger than the imperial family in Faust?”

“Of course not! Our mighty emperor wouldn’t be the ruler if there were. Actually, all the islands above the fifth layer are sealed. The first three islands of the fifth layer are also sealed,” Mordred explained.

“But won’t somebody claim them?”

“The islands are sealed, and only a blessing from the Eternal Dragon can lift the seal. One needs to make enough sacrifices to the Eternal Dragon to do that.”

“Sacrifice? What kind of sacrifice? And what kind of blessing does that render? And what’s the point of unsealing an island, just for another habitable place?” Richard realised that there was still so much for him to learn.

“Alright, you’ll know about the use of the church soon. It’s about time for you to see your father, I’ll bring you over. It wouldn’t be nice to make Master wait!”

# Book 1, Chapter 67 - City of Legends

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Even without looking up at the miraculous sky, the ground of Faust was a sight that was equally vast to behold. Buildings of different styles dotted the landscape as far as the eyes could see, some with round roofs and others pointed; some with curtain walls adorned with colourful tinted glass and huge french windows... Winding hallways were aplenty, and impossible to count. Passing through an intersection, Richard even saw a triforium covering the entire block. Fountains and modest plazas of all varieties were scattered all over the place, each decorated in a unique manner. Essential ornaments like columns, banisters, carved statues, porcelain, and murals of embedded mosaic were everywhere, but never once repeated.

Bathed in pale gold light, the entire city seemed to be frozen into the most beautiful dusk. Even the pedestrians passing through the streets were dressed immaculately, behaving with grace that befitted the style of the city.

However, Richard saw a completely different sort of perfection, one that ignored the awnings, the promotional tricks, the badges and emblems, the bonsai, and all other man-made tricks. No, the city itself was perfect. Be it material, colour, shape, or style, all the roads and even small city creations like fountains and plazas displayed a peculiar type of precise harmony; one that made them seem complete and inseparable, as though they were all an integral whole designed and built at the same time without a single bit of modification. For a city of such a large scale, it was rather inconceivable.

The main road of the city was a simple example, a long boulevard that he was following Mordred through. Other than the fact that every stone on the path had a unique pattern on it, everything was the same. It was like everything had been extracted from the same huge piece of rock.



The boulevard itself was a gentle upward slope, and the further up one went the more secluded and quiet it got. The massive trees lining the boulevard were so huge that their treetops nearly covered the entire sky, branches drooping down with strings of unripe fruit that were a full shade of red. The wide and plump branches and leaves swayed in the breeze.

Richard observed the trees along the path attentively— even though he could not name them, he could tell from their features that the natural habitat of such trees should be in the south where the climate was more tropical, not here in the northern highlands where it was dry and cold.

The weather of the Eternal Plains seemed unable to penetrate Faust's front gate. All year round, regardless of what season it was in the outside world, the city of legends remained warm and damp with little changes, which was the main reason for the abundance of tall, shady trees, clear streams, and pretty fountains.

A magnificent shrine entered Richard's view as they approached the end of the road. Standing at seven stories tall, it was accessible from sixty seven paths that surrounded it from all directions, each slightly narrower than the long boulevard. The square in front of the temple was filled with vehicles of all types, as well as stops for griffins, wyverns, and morsehill hawks. Robed in coats embroidered with the crests of various houses, groups of slaves moved heavy goods in and out of the stations without rest. There were occasional griffin packs descending together, dropping off well-dressed aristocrats.

Twelve metres tall and ten metres wide, the main gate of the temple was big enough for three large carriages to pass through simultaneously. Right atop the gate sat a crest in the shape of an hourglass, the sacred symbol of the Eternal Dragon. Richard was greeted by a large main hall upon entering, with seven exits and a winding hallway that led upwards.

Richard followed Mordred through the third exit from the left,

into a slightly smaller hall. Smaller was relative— this hall was still several hundred square metres in size, able to hold the largest of cargo chariots. There was a magic formation at the end of the hall, with two clean and unique-looking magic puppets crouched by the side. A beam of light occasionally shot out of their chests, melting a small piece of magic metal that they then beat into shape.

Mordred pointed at the two magic puppets, commenting, “They’re prophets of the Eternal Dragon. Honestly speaking, nobody knows where they come from; they were already here when humans first discovered Faust and settled down in it. You can see them in every part of Faust related to magic. They automatically restore damaged magic formations and repair roads and shrines. They’re just like worker bees.”

After staring at the two magic puppets for a while, Richard asked, “They seem rather strange, and different from what I have learnt about magic puppets. What powers their movement?”

Mordred shrugged his shoulders. “Probably some sort of magic force that we are not aware of as yet. In any case, when these fellows run out of power, they run to the Church of the Eternal Dragon and stay there for the night, after which they can be active for a couple of months. Isn’t it fascinating? People just started viewing them as servants of the Eternal Dragon as time passed, showing them great respect and reverence. Without them, Faust probably would have ceased to exist a long time ago. At least up till now, the smiths of mankind are still unable to fix anything in this city.

“But, Little Richard,” he added, “Nobody has been able to find out what these puppets are made of yet. A family secretly captured these puppets in the past to analyse them, but that angered the Eternal Dragon. That very night their island was rocked by a volcanic eruption, a hurricane, a tsunami, and a thunderstorm. It was as if the very end of the world had arrived, and eventually only a few people managed to escape and survive. Since then, no one

has dared to disturb the magic puppets.”

Richard immediately caught onto the main point, asking, “So you mean Faust originally existed since a long time ago, and all we did was discover the place and occupy the city? Is that it?”

“Of course. Building a city of this scale with our current strength would only be a miracle!” Mordred sighed ruefully. Evidently such miracles could subdue even a bloodthirsty and murderous knight like him. Patting Richard’s shoulder, he commented, “The reason so many great families, including your father, are so eager to establish a presence in Faust at any cost is for the Church of the Eternal Dragon. Offering sacrifices to the esteemed Eternal Dragon in the church gives them a chance to have the dragon’s grace bestowed upon them. Blessings of all aspects are included, though the most valuable blessing among all would be one related to the flow of time. Whatever happens, though, eventually depends on luck. The offering of sacrifices is the biggest privilege of the royal family and the fourteen aristocrats families.”

Mordred had already brought Lava along as he spoke, stepping into the teleportation formation. The teleportation formation started to radiate a brilliant turquoise light, as a thin curtain of light rose from the ground and surround the two of them. Richard only felt a faint dizziness before everything was covered by a screen of rainbow light.

They reappeared at a small plaza, only a few thousand metres in size but separated from other areas with some low railings. A short distance behind Richard was the edge of the island, and he could even see some scattered rocks floating independently in mid-air, tumbling around and orbiting the island they were on.

A pier— tens of metres long and radiating a metallic luster— extended to the west of the plaza, the bulk of it off the island. That was the runway for the griffins and wyverns to take off and land. A row of storehouses sat right at the end, with the nests of the griffins and wyverns occupying the left and right of the runway

respectively.

# Book 1, Chapter 68 - Knights

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Towards the east of the plaza was a tower that stood a hundred and twenty metres tall. A giant ballista was in place on a shooting platform atop it, with two knights standing guard at the side observing their surroundings vigilantly. The teleportation formation and runway were both within the tower's firing range, making it capable of defending the huge airspace from enemy invasions.

The foundation and stairwells of the tower seemed relatively new, as if only completed recently, but the body itself had many scars of battle. Cast in metal, the ballista platform had several areas that needed mending. Evidently this tower had passed the test of battle not long ago.

The island wasn't particularly large, a rough circle that was about five hundred metres in diameter. More than half the island was uneven terrain, with the highest point in the north being a good fifty metres taller than the plaza in which he was stood. It wasn't until he'd actually stepped foot on the island that he realised the interior was nothing close to the model's.

Be it from the model, or when he was gazing into the distant Eternal Plains from Faust, everything in his line of sight had been a scenic, beautiful landscape with shady foliage everywhere. All of Faust seemed to share that particular climate, just on different scales. Here, however, Richard could see that the highest peak was actually a volcano, and an active one at that! Covered in pale grey ash, the mouth of the volcano unceasingly spewed out wisps of thick smoke. In contrast, there was even a forest at the bottom, the shades of green clearly distinguishable from the bleak grey of the volcano behind.

A grand and majestic ancient castle stood at the foot of the volcano, sitting amidst the undulating terrain. The dark walls and the spire as tall as the volcano itself were very similar to Blackrose

Castle, although the imposing and steady aura in Richard's memory had been replaced by a fierce and menacing one. There was a bunch of buildings just outside the castle, built in the same way and densely packed. Most had solid walls and narrow windows, making them good bunkers if war reached the streets. Several striking arrow towers stood tall on a few high vantage points, encompassing the whole of the island in their firing range.

As he looked at the volcano, Richard's heart started to beat faster and faster without his knowledge. The smell of sulphate lingered in the air, giving him a sense of familiarity.

Two fully armoured knights walked over just at that moment, taking over Lava and the armoured warhorse. Mordred then led Richard towards the castle.

Although the path to the castle was wide, it meandered along on the way. Richard could see sturdy towers at every turn, with many flat and long nozzles aimed at the road. The crossbows within could easily pierce through the heavy armour of knights within the ten metre range.

There was a significantly smaller crowd here than down in Faust proper, with fewer women, children, and elderly. There was an exceptionally high number of warriors.

The path from the plaza to the castle was merely a few hundred metres long, but Richard had seen at least six warriors with two runes on their bodies. Although they weren't qualified to be called rune knights, they were already elites as foot soldiers. More importantly, these warriors were still young with plenty of room for improvement. As long as their bodies could bear one more rune, they could meet the standard of rune knights. Following the standard of five runes per knight, they still needed to make up for two more runes and would need a year of special training before they could serve that role. However, even if rare there were steeds capable of bearing two runes themselves. Still, one such steed could easily cost more than over ten foot soldiers, and the fighting

strength of the mount clearly wouldn't be on the same level as its master's. Ideally, a rune knight had four rune slots himself with a single one on his mount.

Lava was an exception here. The stallion had a whopping four runes on its body, of the same rank as Gaton's Darkmoon Volcano and Darkmoon Blackflame.

Judging from what he'd seen so far, Richard felt like this island was a strong floating fortress, equipped to the teeth. But then again, the Archerons were a military family and Gaton had only just made headway into Faust. It would be strange for him to have remodelled it into a bunch of palaces and gardens. Thinking about it, Richard grew curious about how the bottom-ranked seventh island would look.

The gates of the castle began opening slowly on their own, even without Mordred's instruction. Behind the gates was a small open-air plaza with ten metre tall walls surrounding it. The walls were equipped with arrow towers of their own, capable of targeting the interior. This ensured that there was no need to fear the castle gates being breached. Anyone who managed to do so would only enter the plaza to meet their own doom.

It was rather dark and gloomy inside the castle, and one needed magic or oil lamps to light the way. The passages were far from wide, instead winding and complicated. The passages were filled with dark rooms and weapons of different ranks, with many thick rectangular metal shields resting against the walls. The weapons were so polished that one could see their reflections on the shields. Sharp and flickering against the light, these fearsome weapons were clearly not for decoration. In times of need, one could stick the shields into the ground and prop them up against special ranks to make sturdy and effective bunkers. This castle was evidently built from the start to fight an enemy to the death.

The ground floor of the castle consisted of the arms depot, the granary, a weaponry storehouse as well as some secret paths. The

guest rooms and living rooms were above, and it wasn't until he walked into the command hall on the fourth floor that Richard spotted his father.

A gigantic stone platform stood in the middle of the command hall, shining with faint magic light. A pale yellow glimmer was floating ten metres above the platform, showing a three-dimensional map of some place. Geography was a compulsory course in the Deepblue, and given the sheer scale of the area depicted Richard would have identified it immediately if it was in Norland. However, the map was completely foreign to his eyes, and none of the signs made much sense. It couldn't be mainland Norland.

There were four people aside from Gaton in the command hall, the most peculiar of them being a man that looked to be in his forties. He looked devout, dressed in overwashed cleric robes with tattered embroidery on the sleeves. A thick religious tome was hung from a copper zip on his robes, but the black cover and copper rose engraved on it didn't ring any bells as to his religion.

To the right of the cleric was a strong man who looked to be at least 2.5 metres tall. His muscular body told of his fearsome strength, and the leather armour he was dressed in left the densely packed tattoos under the thick hair on his arms and chest completely exposed. The tattoos added to his ferocious image, but to Richard they had an even worse effect. He could tell from one look that those weren't any normal tattoos— they were grade 3 runes! Given the strong physique of the man, he looked capable of sustaining five or more such runes at that!



# Book 1, Chapter 69 - Knights

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On Gaton's left was an extremely eye-catching tall woman. She had a head of fiery-red hair that looked like flames leaping over her shoulders, and when she turned she showed thick lips with an unconcealable sex appeal. She was wearing dark red robes, the dense elemental aura flowing from them indicating this was a rare mage robe that could provide a powerful boost to dire elemental magic. However, unlike normal robes the neck was cut exceedingly low, revealing fair flesh and half of two swollen globes. Few mages wore something so revealing, but the elemental aura she continuously emanated made it obvious that she was a grand mage.

There was a realistic black dragon tattooed between her breasts, its head and tail occupying the two spheres. It seemed built to attract the attention of all males, and Richard's gaze landed there naturally as well.

However, he suddenly froze when he looked at it. That tattoo was a rune as well, but he couldn't tell its use!

As if sensing Richard's gaze, the woman suddenly laughed and looked towards him, twitching her mouth in his direction and silently sending him a flying kiss.

"Lina! That's my son. If you dare lay your hands on him, don't blame me if I don't show you face." While Gaton's head had been lowered as he stared at the magic map, he seemed to have noticed everything she was doing and eyed the female mage from the side.

Lina chuckled, the melodious laughter somehow seeming extremely pleasing to the ear to Richard. There seemed to be a strange sort of charm to it, making Richard feel a closeness to her for some reason. He wouldn't even mind sharing more private information with her. Her laughter gradually filled his ears, and that boiling bloodline in Richard began to stir once more, the

instincts of a male slowly raising its head.

Lina blinked and said, “Master, your son seems pretty amazing. It looks like he knows everything. What if he looks for me of his own accord?”

Gaton chuckled, “If you can seduce him to your bed without using your innate abilities, I won’t care at all.”

Lina smiled again and then sent Richard a flying kiss with larger gestures. Richard couldn’t help but flush. It was the first time he was being teased by a woman in public like this.

Just as he was feeling flustered, a young and handsome man suddenly appeared by her side. He had a sunny disposition, and a pair of blue eyes. He wasn’t tall and sturdy, instead rather frail and thin. He looked even slightly shorter than Richard himself, not even reaching six feet in height. He was dressed like a younger noble, but the quality of the clothing itself was pretty mediocre. The design wasn’t plain, but it wasn’t specifically gorgeous either.

There seemed to be no special equipment on the youth, nor could Richard sense any power from him. In all honesty, his presence was so tiny it was shocking. When watching Lina, Richard had even completely disregarded his existence, which was shocking in itself. Even with Lina’s undeniable beauty and natural seductiveness in the way, being able to hide from Richard’s view meant he must have used some special methods, or there was an absolute gap in their strength.

The man saw through Richard’s shock and smiled slightly. “Hello, Little Richard. My name is Cyrden, and I’m someone who walks the underworld. I’m not an assassin, instead of a more widespread profession. You’ll find people like me no matter which city you go to: I’m a thief.”

“Thief?” Richard was now truly astonished, and he almost shouted the word out. Just the fact that Cyrden could completely mask his aura and escape his senses was terrifying enough. How

could he be a mere thief? With such power, he could steal everything from anyone below sainthood and grand mages if he truly was just a thief. On top of that, the fact that he could stand here in this hall and analyse the map with Gaton was more than enough to indicate his strength.

On that day, Richard had seen four amazing people, four of the thirteen knights that had marched to Faust alongside Gaton Archeron. Asiris the Dark Priest, Lina the Dragon Mage, Ward the Berserker, and Cyrden the Odd Thief. He'd already met Mordred long ago as well. And in the middle of all these people, Gaton was the first person one would notice if they entered this command hall. While he didn't exude an aura of power, he still managed to be a natural centre of attention.

Gaton furrowed his brows and swept his gaze over the four knights, and then pointed at a symbol of a town on the magic map and said, "Lina will lead the army this time. Within fifteen days, I want to see you reach this castle. Within thirty days after that, I want to hear a report of your success."

Lina first cheered, and then cried out in alarm. "Wait, reaching in fifteen days? Goodness, then shouldn't I leave right now? Even if I do that, I might not even reach in time! Master, you're doing this on purpose, aren't you? Are you afraid I'd take your Little Richard to my bed?"

Before Gaton could answer, Ward exclaimed with a sturdy voice akin to steel, "So you don't want to go? Good, then I'll go! It's been far too long since I did anything. The defence of this castle is great. Only someone like me who specialises in attacking towns can do it. Having you go is just a waste of time."

Lina immediately cried out in anger, "What rubbish! Since when have I been unable to take towns? Can this castle ward off my Sarumbel? You want to look for a place to duke it out?"

Ward licked his lips and sneered, "Let's do that! What, do you

think I'm scared of you or something?"

Clang! Clang! Gaton rapped on the stone counter lightly, and Lina and Ward immediately went quiet.

"Lina, are you going?" Gaton asked calmly.

"Yes, of course!" Lina was practically shouting now. The two orbs of her chest bobbed up and down with her movements, as if about to free themselves from the restraints of her clothing at any time.

"Then you'd better make it quick. There's only half a day left for you to make preparations," Gaton reminded her.

Shocked, Lina glared at Ward before she left. She gave Richard a long look, walking past him while emanating a fragrance before she left the command hall. She really didn't dare waste any time, opening a portal right in the corridor the moment she left the large bronze gates and stepping through. It was still rather expensive for a grand mage to cast a rank 8 spell like that, shaving off a quarter of one's battle strength.

Gaton pointed at another canyon and told Ward, "I'll give you fifteen rune knights. Within ten days, you are to occupy the commanding heights at the two sides of this canyon. When Lina is attacking the town, not one man nor mount can be allowed through."

"No problem!" The burly man quirked his mouth and answered, thumping his chest hard to show his determination. Cyrden and Asiris were then given their own missions, and they all left the commanding hall.

It then became still in the hall. Mordred retreated, pulling the doors closed on the way out.

# Book 1, Chapter 70 - Legendary Spell

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Gaton just stared at Richard for an entire minute, not speaking a word. Richard for his part stood and met his father's gaze with no intentions of backing down. Sweat beaded all over his forehead very quickly, rolling down his cheeks until his clothes were drenched, but he held strong.

The stress of meeting Gaton's gaze could not be described in words. Richard's body was trembling within the blink of an eye, and he felt like he would fall apart at any moment after very little time. And still he gritted his teeth and pressed on, looking to continue standing there second to second.

Just as his gaze began to grow blurry, the mountainous pressure suddenly disappeared without a trace. Richard sighed, growing so feeble he almost collapsed, but he kept himself upright with sheer force of will.

Gaton suddenly burst into laughter, exclaiming, "Great! Looks like Sharon wasn't stingy with your training after all! That's rather rare... Wait, it feels bad to start badmouthing her now. Come here, kid! Your dad's going to show you something good!"

Richard furrowed his brows, obviously feeling uncomfortable with the term Gaton had used for himself. He didn't speak up however, instead walking to the magic map just like Gaton had asked him to.

"See this? This is a partial map of the Resting Orchid Plane. It's a name I came up with myself, the actual registration number for it is 17658 in the Church of the Eternal Dragon. I've been campaigning in this plane for nearly ten years, and have a fifth of the land here. That's only an estimate, however. I haven't finished exploring the borders of the continent so I don't know the full size."

The map made it evident that the plane's topology was similar to

Norland's. There were mountains, rivers, oceans, and plains here, and based on the markings and calculations on the map borders it covered over a million square kilometres! The huge patches of green on the map showed that this was a continent full of life, with all sorts of natural resources. The best part was that, because the planes were similar, there wasn't much need for processing the gathered resources which would reduce any wear and tear. Even if Gaton possessed a mere fifth of the area shown on the map, that was still 200,000 square kilometres! That was enough territory to create a large dukedom on Norland!

A charming smile appeared on Gaton's face as he spoke to Richard, "Kid, do you know why I want you to see the map of the Resting Orchid Plane?"

Richard obviously had no idea, and Gaton did not expect him to answer. He continued without pause, "The entirety of my earnings from the Resting Orchid Plane, as well as a small amount from another common plane went into your studies in the Deepblue. Even if you're back I need to give Sharon my income for another five years. I've already made inroads into these planes, and the profits from the territory I own every year already exceed a million gold coins. On top of that, they're slated to increase by over 30% year on year for the next five years."

Richard immediately went quiet. He didn't even need to think it over to realise that the income from these planes over the next five years would exceed ten million coins. This amount was something that even he, someone who'd gotten used to the costs of the Deepblue, felt stifled by. When a standard rune knight cost 500,000 coins to create, ten million would give someone two entire squads!

Gaton looked at Richard and continued, "The reason I'm telling you this is because I want you to know the price that had to be paid to make you a runemaster mage. We Archerons are always fair. There are 37 members of your generation of or nearly of age. Nine

are my children, your half siblings. There's also a total of 71 who aren't yet of age as well. Amongst all of these contenders, you're the one we've invested the most into. In fact, the total investment we've put into you is more than the total sum of your brothers and sisters combined. And that's just the beginning, I will only pour more and more into you in the future. Your teacher, Sharon, will be doing the same."

Richard instinctively wanted to reject Gaton's financial aid, but he found he didn't have the means to do so. He'd already used up far too much of Gaton's resources, and with the man mentioning Sharon as well he couldn't say anything to object. Only after leaving the Deepblue had he come to understand just how much Sharon had given him.

A world of magic had been opened up to Richard inside the Deepblue, a special treatment only he had been entitled to receive. With her imperceptible influence on Professor Fayr and the other grand mages, and the custom schedule she'd built for him, Sharon had actually taught him a school of thought and pushed him onto his path as a runemaster. That was actually the most precious thing a teacher could give a student.

Far too many people studied a lifetime of magic from mediocre teachers, forever moving in circles within the same box of set rules. All they grasped of spells was accurate chanting and precise mana allocation. Even if they spent their entire lifetime throwing out fireballs, they would never be able to even understand the principles behind the spell, let alone make improvements upon it.

Most mages could only replicate past spells, forever unable to invent their own. And just like such mages made up a majority, runemasters without their own creations were a majority in the field of runecrafting as well.

Gaton saw that Richard hadn't rejected him, and nodded in satisfaction, "Not bad, kid. You've grown up quite a bit, far better than your old man back in the day. But it won't be all that easy for

you to achieve as much as I did when I was at your age. You've been quiet, you don't make a ruckus, you don't drink, you don't flirt around— why? Men need friends and brothers. When you have enough brothers, nobody will dare provoke you. There is strength in numbers!”

“But Master relies on herself!” Richard objected, an instinctive reaction that would arise regardless of what exactly Gaton said.

However, he had nothing to back these words of his. After all, there were as many as seventeen grand mages in the Deepblue, and numerous other great mages as well. All information of her battles was altered twice by the time it reached him, sometimes even thrice, so one could only imagine how trustworthy it was.

Of course she only fought alone after reaching the legendary realm, but that was more because those under level 20 were of no use in battles of that level. Moreover, being the person with the most intimate relationship with her he'd vaguely sensed the strangeness of her battle style. She didn't seem to walk a path of firm courage.

The moment Richard's words left his mouth, Gaton's expression immediately turned strange. He stroked his moustache, but could not completely cover his mouth that had opened wide. Richard only saw soundless laughter from the man as he tried his best not to make any sound.

Only after a long while did Gaton finally stop laughing and ask Richard, “Kid, do you know what your teacher's favourite legendary spell is?”

The higher the ranking of a legendary mage, the greater the number of legendary spells they could cast. However, there were few legendary spells that were spread around extensively, and Richard had seen them all in magic tomes before. He knew that Gaton had to have a reason for asking this, and he tried his best to recall and make conjectures, “Summon Red Dragon? Sun Strike?



Vampiric Mist?”

These three spells were publicly acknowledged to be the legendary mage’s favourite spells. They were extremely powerful, simple to cast, and were very effective at increasing one’s offensive power in battle.

# Book 1, Chapter 71 - Legendary Spell

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“It’s Summon Red Dragon. More precisely, when Sharon uses it it becomes Greater Dragon Summon,” Gaton answered quickly.

“Back in the day, when your teacher first entered the legendary realm, there were some... let’s say some little conflicts between her and the Archerons. I was young, hot-blooded, and competitive at that time, and I brought six friends with just as much energy as me from the family to battle her. We weren’t legendary ourselves yet, but we had strength in numbers and the combination of classes wasn’t too bad. Altogether, we had just about enough battle might to fight a legendary being.

“Sharon had just advanced, and only had one legendary spell. Once she cast it she would only be a peak grand mage, and while there would definitely be people amongst us who died to that spell... When has a true Archeron ever feared death?”

Gaton raised his head and looked outside the window as he recounted the past, an unintended arrogance in his expression. The fact that seven young Archerons had the guts to challenge a legendary mage was a definite proof of their courage in any era. Of course, courage and recklessness were inseparable twins, with a close sibling called stupidity.

And just as expected, Gaton grew bitter after that hint of pride, speaking slowly, “The very first spell your teacher learnt was Summon Red Dragon... The beginning of the battle that day was classic: our grand mages used Time Stop to counteract Sharon’s own, and she used her absolute advantage at cast speed to stop all our movements with Bind Group. She followed up with a portal that shifted her a hundred metres away, before she finished her legendary spell.

Halfway through the incantation we realised that it was the Summon Red Dragon spell, and at that moment it was like we’d

seen some hope of success! After all, red dragons themselves didn't have legendary strength, and we could hold it down with a mere two people. The rest could then focus their efforts on attacking the legendary mage, but..."

There was a sense of struggle in his expression, indicating that the trauma he'd acquired from that battle wasn't insignificant, "When her chant finished, we were actually faced with three dragons, not one! And only one of them was red, the other two actually black! And then... and then everything was straightforward. The three dragons charged out and made us all fall, while your adorable little teacher began eating fruits at the back."

Richard gasped, asking in shock, "Three?!"

"I only found out later, but Sharon's bloodline ability is extremely rare, boosting the power of her summoning spells. It turned the ordinary Summon Red Dragon into Greater Dragon Summon, a spell that could summon both stronger and more dragons than the former. Of course, there's no real difference between two dragons and three." Gatton sighed in admiration before he shook his head and smiled at Richard, "If Sharon were to cast a Greater Dragon Summon now, there will definitely be more than three. You understand, don't you? If anyone wants a one-on-one battle with her, they won't end up in good shape."

A matured red dragon wasn't much different from a paladin in terms of battle prowess, being somewhere between levels 18 and 20. Although a red dragon was a powerful supporting force in a battle between legendary beings, it wouldn't be a deciding factor.

However, three dragons was a whole other story. Even three red dragons could be a deciding factor in a battle, and two of Sharon's summons were black dragons instead. A mature black dragon was about level 20, an existence on the verge of stepping into the legendary realm that was far more powerful than a red dragon. Even a single black dragon had the might to turn the tables in a

battle, much less two or three of them.

What Gaton was trying to get at was that his teacher was actually rather poor at solo battles, relying on her powerful talent in combat.

However, Richard would obviously stand on Sharon's side. He immediately expelled such thoughts, asking instead about the outcome of the battle, "So? How many of you died?"

Gaton laughed, saying, "None. Our conflict wasn't very major, and besides your teacher doesn't really like killing people. Rather, she actually enjoys doing business. She let us all off and even gave each of some money as the starting funds for campaigns to acquire our own planes. In exchange, we would give her half the income from the first plane each of us conquered. Of everyone, I got the most money. However, these campaigns weren't without risks. Of the seven Archerons then, only three of us are still alive."

Even from Gaton's light-hearted manner of bringing this up, Richard could still tell how tragic it was. Of the seven young fellows gutsy enough to challenge a legendary mage while not having stepped into that realm themselves, four had fallen in planar battles in a relatively short period of time.

Gaton gazed out of the window at this point, now looking stern, "Alright, it's getting late. Let's not dwell on the past any longer. Richard, you're already of age and considered an official member of the Archeron Family. As the head of the family, not as your father, I will continue to give you resources. However, in return you are to abide by the three ancient traditions of the Archerons. In addition, before you completely repay the family, you need to pledge loyalty to it."

"Before I completely repay the family?" Richard asked.

"Someday in the future, when your contributions to the family surpass the amount it has invested into you, you will no longer be restricted by the family, and can do as you wish. Many Archerons

have walked this path in the past as well.

“However, before you are relieved of your duties, you must abide by the ancient traditions of the family. This is the responsibility of every Archeron,” Gaton said sternly.

“What ancient traditions?”

Gaton’s expression became even more solemn as he straightened his back and said in a low voice, “One, all Archerons shall maintain the purity and continuity of the family bloodline. Two, there shall be no internal battles between members of the family. Three, the strongest Archeron shall be tasked with guarding the family tombs.”

The last two were easy to comprehend, but the first one had Richard stumped. Gaton knew that Richard knew very little about the Archerons’ traditions and secrets, and thus explained further.

The Archeron bloodline was very ancient and mysterious, powerful yet unstable. An entire twenty two different types of abilities had appeared so far in the family, and the purer the bloodline the more powerful the abilities became. It gave rise to beings of unparalleled power.

Thus, the Archerons had a centuries-old precept, which was that the most sacred duty of every member of the family was to maintain the purity of the family bloodline and pass it on. One needed descendants to pass on the bloodline, and to keep it concentrated and pure one would need to marry other Archerons. Thus, all members of the Archeron Family that were supported by its resources had to marry an Archeron and have a child unless they contributed greatly enough. In many cases, their significant other was chosen by the family head or other powerful members, and they had no right to choose anything. The weaker one was, the less they could say. There were many cases of intermarriage in Archeron history, including that between even blood siblings.

Only after hearing this did Richard understand why the

atmosphere had been so strange in Blackrose Castle when he'd met his sisters.

“Things aren't as bad as you think they are, kid!” Gaton chuckled. “As the only runemaster amongst your generation of the Archerons, you have a lot of privileges! Besides getting the most investment, you can choose a few of the girls who don't have partners yet for your own. Of course, this will only continue until you have your own child. In no time at all, you'll know what you can get from the family.”

Richard released a long breath and said, “I... I think I'll rely on myself.”

Gaton looked at Richard, his gaze seeming to have a penetrative force that let him stare right into the depths of Richard's heart. It made him let out an involuntary tremble.

“Kid, don't reach a conclusion so quickly. You'll definitely regret this decision in the future. I think your mother should be the most valuable person in your life.” Gaton's voice was like magic, leaving Richard stunned once more. In that moment, Richard even felt that Gaton knew of his mother's dying wish. However, this was a secret hidden deep in his heart. No matter what, he would not share it with this man.

Even as Richard remained bewildered, Gaton's voice sounded by his ear once more, “Alright, kid! I'll bring you to the family tombs. That is a ceremony that every Archeron has to go through once they come of age.”

Family tombs?!

The term stunned Richard this time, and his mother's voice seemed to ring in his ears once more, “When the day comes that you've grown to become a real man, bury me in the highest layer of your father's family tombs!”

# Book 1, Chapter 72 - Wish

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Richard hadn't expected that the volcano in the centre of the island was actually the ancestral cemetery of the Archeron Family.

Following Gaton out of the back door of the castle, Richard stepped onto the volcano. He immediately felt a gentle fluctuation in the surrounding space, as without warning the lush green forest around them was replaced by red and black. The fresh warm air disappeared, replaced by a strong stench of sulphur. The blue sky was covered by dense grey clouds, the parts that did remain visible being tinted a fiery red. The signature pleasant warmth of Faust had been replaced with blazing heat. It was hard for even Richard to bear, almost as if the air would spark in a moment and set his hair and skin ablaze.

The entire volcano was composed of charcoal-black volcanic rock, with a single meandering path leading to the crater at the centre. The volcano itself wasn't just spouting smoke dormant anymore, instead shaking in its entirety from time to time. One could see huge amounts of fire and smoke from the crater rolling into the sky, merging into the dense clouds.

The main body of the volcano was no longer a mere fifty metres tall, instead near a kilometre high. Hot lava spurted out of the crater on occasion, seeping past its edges and flowing down like a river of fire. Trickling down slowly, some of the lava solidified en route, morphing into a part of the mountain altogether.

What was most unusual was that even though the volcano was trembling non-stop and lava came spilling ever so often, all other parts of the mountain except the fire, smoke and lava river remained completely unchanged, without a single loose or ruptured rock.

Richard combed through his memory, recognising that he'd been taught about such things in preparatory magic classes; this was a

place with spatial properties. However, Richard was stunned the moment he realised this—the biggest example he'd read of was the Lost Paradise, but the entirety of that was as big as one of the larger laboratories in the Deepblue. And yet the towering volcano in front of him was more than a thousand metres tall, making it impossible for him to imagine how it was built from scratch. Looking at the scale and frequency of its spurts, Richard was sure the interior of the mountain was connected to at least one plane of the fire element, if it didn't actually just contain half a plane within. Or perhaps this was a miracle from some god.

On both sides of the uneven path were tombstones of different sizes, erected upon the dark black rock. The graves looked rather strange, Both sides of the path was lined unevenly with the volcanic body, with tombstones of different sizes erected on the dark black rocks. However, the graves looked rather strange, with only the tombstones and no protrusions underneath. As well, there were at most a few hundred of them on the entire volcano, located sparsely apart. He also noticed that there were fewer the closer one got to the mouth. Although the Archerons didn't have a very long history, even the several hundred years they did have would give easily give them tens of thousands of dead members. And surely, given the size of the volcano it would be able to more than a hundred thousand total.

Richard silently trailed behind Gaton, continuing to climb uphill. He found that the volcano was actually roughly divided into five levels, the number of tombs on each level fewer than the last. The inscriptions upon the tombs ranged from simple names to more elaborate descriptions and well-wishes for the deceased.

It wasn't long before they were standing at the edge of the crater, lava less than ten metres ahead of them with hot air blasting into their faces so hard it was difficult for Richard to even open his eyes. This was the highest layer of the Archeron family tombs, the place his mother wanted to be her final resting place.



There were only six tombstones altogether here, spread out in a large area. The tombstones themselves were made of solidified black lava, with no ornaments or additional carvings on the tombstones as if they were just naturally formed cuboids. This level didn't list the lifetime achievements of the deceased like there were in the last few levels. No, there were only names here; unusually long names, written in a script Richard had never seen before.

Richard started reciting the names softly as soon as he saw them, as if a power deep within him gave him an innate ability to recognise the writing at first glance. He could feel every drop of blood in his body trembling as he read the words aloud, jumping along with every syllable he uttered. Every name seemed to contain an immeasurable strength, leading Richard to feel as though something buried deep within him was being awakened from its slumber.

As if he were possessed, Richard read the names on all six of the tombstones once through before jolting back into reality, as though he just woke up from a dream. Gaton nodded at the sight, remarking, "Not bad! Your blood is extremely pure. Maybe you will be able to come to rest right here in the future, returning to the lands of our ancestors."

Richard was still reeling from the shock, distant desolate roars still echoing in his ears. It was as though an ancient existence was within his reach, shouting across time and space without rest. He scanned the six tombstones again with trepidation, although this time he didn't dare say their names aloud again.

"Here lie the six strongest and most formidable Archerons. They fully understood the secrets lying deep in their blood, and awakened the true ancient bloodline within them. That gave them a truenamename that belonged to them and them alone.

"Amongst them were extremely talented geniuses, who owned their truenames since they were young and weak. Most of them did

not possess the gift from birth, however, and emerged as the strong only through battles of blood and fire.”

Gaton paused before continuing, “Truenames are the biggest secrets of every Archeron; they are the source of our strength. As you experienced just now, every truename possesses a great amount of power, each different from the other. Our truenames allow us to touch upon the laws of the plane. Although that touch may be so small it is undetectable, that touch is what allows us to ultimately understand these laws. Thus they give us great strength, and thus they are our biggest secrets. Once someone else learns our true name, they are in control of our life and death. All they have to do is say our truename out loud, and we will know the message they wish to convey. If they say it with the most malicious of curses, even an ordinary man with no special powers can remove all traces of us from the plane.”

Heart trembling with fear, Richard wondered, “If that is the case, why would we want others to know our truenames at all?”

Stroking his beard, Gaton laughed, “Oh, you brat! One day you’ll also probably meet someone you’re willing to reveal your truename to as well. It’ll allow you to immediately know whenever she thinks of you.”

Richard fell silent again. He recalled that his mother had once told him when he was very young that his father had a very, very long name.

Looking around this level of the cemetery, Richard could feel an immense invisible power coming from every tombstone, although there were only six lone tombstones in the wide area. With some difficulty, he asked, “Is this a burial spot only for Archerons with truenames?”

Gaton stared quietly at Richard, his gaze making Richard flustered as if his secrets were getting exposed. Just as Richard was breaking out in nervous sweat, Gaton said, “Only Archerons can be

buried here. Upon my death, I will be the seventh.”

“What about people who are not Archerons?”

Gaton explained meaningfully, “Then they would need the approval of all the Archerons, including me. Richard, there is Archeron blood in you. This too shall be your resting place when you pass. Thus, you should know what getting the approval of the Archerons entails.”

Of course he knew. To get the approval of an Archeron, the easiest and most direct way was to defeat them. There was no other way around it. To fulfil his mother’s last wishes, Richard would have to defeat all the Archerons, including his father.

Including Gaton Isaiah Satanistoria Archeron.

# Book 1, Chapter 73 - Inheritance of the Silver Moon

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“Is there something on your mind?” Gaton’s voice startled Richard out of deep thought. He regained his composure immediately, shaking his head in denial, “Nothing.”

Gaton didn’t continue questioning him, instead walking a couple steps to randomly sit on one of the tombstones. He seemed to have no respect for his ancestors, something that left Richard greatly astonished.

From what he’d learnt the nobles of Norland were very respectful of their ancestors. Many families passed down secret magic to preserve parts of their ancestors’ souls, using their inherited knowledge to unleash powerful secret arts. Outside of the various deities and the Church of the Eternal Dragon, ancestor worship was an important part of the continent’s faith. In fact, the barbarians of Klandor and the various marine tribes paid more importance to their ancestors than the deities themselves. Ancestors were the main target of their faith.

“You think this is unbelievable?” Gaton smiled and looked at Richard.

Despite always feeling like he was being stabbed in his heart, Richard had to admit that Gaton’s actions seemed to match his intentions, and Gaton’s smile was indeed filled with charisma.

“Us Archerons only care about practicality. If we want to express our respect to the ancestors, we’ll awaken the power of our bloodlines and sire offspring with great power. That’s more effective than anything else, and it’s the sort of respect that runs deep in our blood and soul! Alright kid, now let’s see what you’ve learnt in the past few years. Forget magic and runes, I’m not knowledgeable about that myself. Your body and footwork makes it look like you’ve learnt some techniques. Show me!”

Gaton crossed his arms and sat down randomly, his gaze continuously sweeping across Richard's body. Every glance he took made Richard feel like the man was seeing his true self.

Richard calmed himself down, taking out a dull black dagger before he started displaying the underworld battle techniques he'd learnt from Naya. The Blade of Calamity's curse was actually a bloodline ability, so he couldn't learn it, and even if he could he was still a runemaster and mage. He wouldn't have the time to include such distractions in his daily schedule, lest he end up being a jack of all trades.

These techniques weren't very complicated, their difficulty lying in the accuracy of the execution. When the Blade of Calamity attacked, he could use his knife to cut a strand of hair into three. Naya's limiting factor was actually the power of his body, but he could use his pure skill to jump levels in a fight. Before disappearing from the underworld, a mere level 16 Naya had repeatedly relied on his curse and battle techniques to kill even saint level elites.

Richard's numeric vision allowed him to extend this to its logical limit. He could even identify the millimetre-level changes to the position of his blade after every strike— if he was five millimetres high, or two millimetres low, he would amend his next strike to fix that difference. Of course he wasn't a martial artist himself, so there was a limit to the control he had over his own body. He could choose the right tool and place when crafting his runes, so he could control his precision to under two tenths of a millimetre— one tenth was the limit of a runemaster and any further improvement would have to come from one's understanding of magic and usage of materials— but in battle it would be great if he could adjust to a single millimetre. And when he used Eruption, his accuracy would plunge.

It took less than three minutes for him to execute a set of battle techniques. In fact, this set of battle techniques was made up from

a few separate moves, some of them being very peculiar. For example, a move that once saved Richard's life—the lizard crawl. This set of fighting techniques was executed perfectly, such that even the Blade of Calamity would be impressed if he saw it. Strangely, Richard automatically performed at his best whenever Gaton was around.

Richard was not a warrior. Although he had a good foundation to become one from his life in the mountains, he had sacrificed some of his physique for the sake of becoming a mage. Even with Sharon's meticulous care he didn't have the makeup to be a gifted warrior anymore, so moves focused on accuracy were more suited to him.

Gaton showed no sign of joy or admiration when he saw it, however. He instead shook his head, saying, "Hey, show me that piece of broken metal in your hand!"

Richard handed over the dagger to Gaton obediently. This dagger was made of refined steel, six times heavier than normal steel and enchanted with obscurity and sharpness. The obscurity enchantment was what made it a dull black, almost unable to reflect light so it could be concealed in the dark. The sharpness enchanted made it 20% more effective than a normal blacksteel dagger as well. In the hands of a decent assassin, this dagger could exhibit great ability to kill.

All this quality made it expensive. It was easily worth over 8000 coins. Of course this wasn't anything in the Deepblue, but it was a dagger that Naya had gifted Richard from his personal collection for self defense. Just this could highlight the insurmountable gap between a normal elite and a legendary being.

Gaton snorted, just crushing the dagger into a ball and throwing it into the mouth of the volcano. "That's a weapon for pansies! You're my son, Elena's son! You're a runemaster and mage, not a rat sneaking around in the underworld! Of course you could possibly become a legendary being by poking people in the ass, but

that isn't what you're meant to be! You don't have that in you at all! Luckily the person who taught you only gave you something basic, it can barely be called a common battle technique, and it won't affect your future. If not, hmph, I'd have to make a trip to the Deepblue and chop him into pieces!"

Richard wasn't any normal fifteen-year-old youth. His wisdom had greatly been strengthened over five years of intense testing, to the point that he'd absorbed four times the knowledge the average person would. Thus, his capacity to understand the world around him was equivalent to someone who'd reached his thirties, and his knowledge matched up to someone who was thirty-two or thirty-three.

He did not seem very affected by Gaton's bold words, instead replying faintly, "I don't think you need to make a trip down to the Deepblue to deal with the person who taught me this. Forget Mordred, even any one of those four we saw just now would be enough. Why do you want to make a trip down yourself? Are you worried about Master?"

"Why would I be worried about her? What a joke!" Gaton pranced up from the tombstone and raged with an ashen face. This was the most lack of control Richard had ever seen out of him. The man himself realised it as well, immediately forcing a laugh before he slowly sat down on the tombstone as if nothing had happened.

The moment he spoke again, Gaton's unruly and frivolous behaviour disappeared into a solemn dignity. He looked like an exemplar of an aristocrat, but Richard could sense it was something he was doing to brush off the awkwardness.

"Hmph, that Sharon, why would I be scared of her? But um, honestly, although your father is skillful, I cannot defeat three to five black dragons by myself, at least not yet. So it isn't very practical for me to fight that money-obsessed woman solo. But if I go to the Deepblue to kill some small fry, she won't go to the extent to retaliate and kill me. Moreover... For certain reasons, I can't

grievously harm her.” Gaton’s tone was solemn, but his imposing manner was not even half of what it was initially.



# Book 1, Chapter 74 - Inheritance Of The Silver Moon

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Richard thought of something all of a sudden, asking directly, “Master didn’t leave any trauma with you, did she?”

“Of course not!” Gaton replied furiously. But then he realised that he’d stood up, sitting back down so forcefully the tombstone under him let out a creak, as if it would collapse at any time. This was a tombstone with the truenname of one of the Archeron ancestors!

Under the pressure of Richard’s look of suspicion, Gaton gradually turned quite green. He finally snorted, and said, “There’s some trauma, but that doesn’t even matter! Isn’t it just money?! Your old man is actually a great leader, I’m sure I’ll be able to pay back the debt if I conquer several more planes over the next 180 years!”

These ‘wise’ words didn’t seem very right in Richard’s ears. He wanted to ask about that 180 year timeframe, whether it was plane time or Norland time, but he hesitated thinking it would be too much to attack the man.

However, Sharon and Mountainsea being in his life had largely influenced Richard’s disposition. One aspect of that was that he was predisposed towards being on the offence.

But the moment Richard was about to speak, Gaton felt a sudden but familiar ill feeling. His sharp intuition told him something bad was going to happen, so he instantly interrupted Richard, “Alright kid! Stop beating about the bush, and forget all that rubbish you learnt in the Deepblue. I’ll teach you some real techniques, ones that will allow you to use the power of your bloodline.”

Gaton rose up and looked at Richard’s unsettled expression. He let out a sigh, saying, “Don’t be in such a hurry to say no, I’m not

teaching you any Archeron arts. Your mother should've taught you these, but since you don't seem to know I'll have to do it myself."

"Mother?" Richard was startled. Although he'd realised during his study in the Deepblue that Elena was not just an acolyte, he didn't expect her to be at the level of a great mage.

Gaton nodded, "Your mother was once a royal of the Silvermoon Palace. In fact, she was the Shaman of Alucia, the Goddess of the Moon. So a part of your bloodline actually comes from the silvermoon elves. What I'm going to teach you now is a secret technique passed down from their shrine."

Gaton swiped his wrist, and a peculiar weapon appeared in his hand. It was around a metre and a half long, with a four centimetre wide blade that had a perfectly straight edge. Sharp on only one side, it seemed more like a long, thin knife than a sword. When Gaton gently flicked the edge of the knife, it started ringing as its tip vibrated endlessly.

"Look carefully. This is one of Silvermoon's secret swords, Annihilation." Gaton stepped forward suddenly, raising the weapon in his hand abruptly and holding it straight in front of him.

A blue crescent slowly emerged above Gaton's head, concentrating gleaming azure moonlight on him like a screen of water. The tip of the weapon glistened blue as well, and some mysterious power seemed to push Gaton's body as he launched ten metres forth in an instant. The weapon pierced forth without warning.

This move was beautiful yet desolate, and Gaton's steps left behind a trail of blue as if this was a dream. But the sword contained the strength of the fourth moon, the blue moon, and whizzed ahead on its path. It looked like it would pierce through even a huge dragon in its path.

It was unknown when exactly Gaton appeared in front of Richard

again. He'd already stowed the sword away, although it still seemed like the blue moon had leapt across space to stay over his head. The projection was still within ten metres of Gaton, shining cool moonlight onto Richard's body.

Gaton gently stroked the long sword, saying disappointedly, "This is a move your mother used once, so I could remember it clearly. The other moves I figured out on my own in the free time I've had over the past years, but without the silvermoon bloodline I'm not sure if they're correct. Take mine as a foundation, and perfect the moves when you have a chance."

The crescent above Gaton's head turned red, changing from the fourth moon to the first. His momentum burst forth again, and this time the sword with a blanket of scarlet moonlight on it chopped silently through the air as he took the same forward steps.

The first move was like the advance of a lone brave warrior, but this was more like a regiment exerting irresistible force. The crescent in the air faded as it followed the sword's trajectory, and it looked like a light red crystal was infused into Gaton's graceful moves as he outlined a new moon. This was the secret technique corresponding to the scarlet moon: Beheading Newmoon.

This was soon followed by the second moon, the amber moon, and this attack was one that covered an entire area around him. The violet moon, the fifth moon, was a single fast attack able to tackle quick opponents. The silver moon, the sixth, created a spiral of endless attacks at the enemy.

To end it all, when the moon above Gaton's head turned a jade green, he stopped moving immediately and stood straight. Light green moonlight poured down his shoulders like the flow of mercury, diffusing the moment it touched the ground and spreading a few metres away. A rich smell of life spread everywhere the moonlight touched, dyeing even the black volcanic rock a rich green. This stone, that hadn't budged even during an eruption of lava, actually cracked apart to reveal young seedlings

growing out. This was the third moon's secret sword: a devout prayer that could restore life.

Once the green moon slowly disappeared, the smell of life faded back into that familiar boiling sulphur. The young seedlings wilted immediately, turning to a dark gray ash that eventually just disappeared. Everything returned to normal, leaving those six illusory moons seeming like nothing but a dream.

“There should be a technique corresponding to the seventh moon as well, but I can't figure it out.” Gaton threw the long sword over to Richard, “There, it's now yours! I snatched this sword from an elven kingdom in a strange plane. You can give it a name later.”

Richard felt abnormally at ease when he got the sword, so much so that he couldn't help but feel surprised. There was still a hint of the six moons on the blade, and it made his body hum slightly. The seventh moon itself, the gold moon, was the darkest of the lot. It only appeared a few days every year, and was easily neglected with how dull its colour was. Its power was bound to be the hardest to unearth.

The sword was sheathless. Richard stroked the blade gently, but accidentally cut himself on the blade. A drop of blood landed on the blade, but it slid down quickly and dripped onto the ground. There was no bloodstain left on the weapon's blade.

He automatically grabbed the shaft with both hands, pointing it straight ahead. The blade gently vibrated here, and a faint blue appeared on the tip. Richard had felt something unique from the first move Gaton had displayed that allowed him to already vaguely feel the power of the fourth moon.

‘Maybe it was because he saw Mother using the move, so he could understand it better than the rest,’ Richard thought. What he didn't know was that Gaton had discovered this technique when it pierced through his own heart. He'd also neglected another problem at that moment: how had Gaton used a secret sword of the

elves that was only passed down within Silvermoon Palace?

Gaton sat down on another tombstone and returned to his original state, saying, “Now tell me, what are you planning to do next? You can stay here and continue runecrafting, or come to my territory and form your own troop. I’ll give you ten for the time being, and you can also join my own troops in attacks. It’s Archeron tradition to start training as a normal troop leader, but since you’re a runemaster you can start off as the troop mage at once. You’ll also have your own rune knights to protect you. Of course, you can also just build your own lab and experiment with magic if you want.”

Richard had already decided what to do in the future. He took a deep breath and replied, “I want to go take part in the war for a plane.”

“Alone?” Gaton was stunned, and rather doubtful of Richard’s decision.

“Mm, alone. I want to discover the secrets of the planes by myself, conquering a few of them along the way. I don’t want to follow you and a big army.” Richard was very firm with his words.

Gaton laughed, “Not bad! But this is war you’re talking about, not some ordinary adventure. Even adventurers need parties. Wars aren’t games, you can’t conquer planes alone!”

Richard frowned and replied, “I am already a qualified runemaster. Within two to three years, I can form two ten-man troops. I can give you ten rune knights, and leave the other ten for myself to form a core troop for planar battles with. From what I remember, ten rune knights is enough for an elementary force in some of the lower planes. The ten warriors that I hand to you can be considered repayment for what the family’s given me. I’m aware that it isn’t enough, but I want to start exploring the planes earlier.”

Gaton’s eyes glistened as he listened to Richard, “You’re saying

you can build twenty rune knights in a mere three years?”

Richard nodded, “All novices, but yes.”

Gaton broke into laughter all of a sudden and slapped Richard’s shoulders, almost making him fall, “That’s enough! I didn’t expect you to be that capable. Maybe you can get some results in the endless planes before I did!”

# Book 1, Chapter 75 - Pride

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Gaton's happiness was not unwarranted. Even if all twenty of the rune knights were novices equipped only with elementary runes, that was at least a hundred runes that Richard needed to produce. Over three years that was an average of about three a month.

Runemasters weren't always successful in producing their runes. Even great runemasters failed on occasion, and regular ones only had a success rate of about 30% for a grade 1 rune. Although grand runemasters were better, they still had a failure rate of about 30% as well.

Although the time taken to manufacture an elementary rune could range from a few days to an entire month, the process couldn't randomly be compressed. The bulk of the time used in the manufacture of a rune was to check for mistakes in the hand-drawn magic formations, and making additional amendments to them. The likelihood of such mistakes having occurred depended on the precision of one's drawing, making it a core quality of a runemaster. And Precision was precisely Richard's greatest strength.

Richard took a little under seven days to build an elementary rune on average, with a failure rate hanging between 10 and 20%. These statistics alone put him almost at the level of a saint runemaster. That being said, none of the saint runemasters on the continent were bored enough to manufacture elementary runes. This was the main reason his earlier runes fetched such exorbitant amounts: the adaptability of his runes and their boost was far beyond the average.

Given the same set of materials, a lower rate of failure and shorter manufacturing period could accumulate and turn two sets of runes into three. This made Richard's profit margins inconceivable; after all this was far more lucrative than producing quality runes every once in a while, since all runes sold at a

minimum fixed market rate. That was also how he'd earned over a million coins in the last year, and the reason he dared to join the ranks of Archerons who were waging wars in the countless planes.

Just like Gaton had said, expeditions into planes were dependent on one's armies. While the military prowess of an individual was important, it was in no way a deciding factor. There were exceptions like Sharon, who could turn a duel into a team battle, but those were just that, exceptions to the rule. With ten level 1 rune knights and the income from selling quality rune slots, Richard could build a small core troop of his own to explore some of the tamest planes.

The planes were boundless and inexhaustible, with nobody knowing exactly how many of them existed or what would happen on unknown planes. Rumours were abound of some lucky people discovering invaluable precious materials in lesser planes at times, and of some tragic brave soul paying a heavy price to attack and occupy a greater plane that was barren and penniless.

Gaton fell deep into thought after having a hearty laugh, muttering to himself for a long time before speaking up more loudly, "Since you're so talented, we'll need to bring many things forward. Before you enter an actual plane I'll prepare all the equipment you need. You'll also have to visit the Archeron base camp and select a few bodyguards, and then choose a partner of pure Archeron blood. If there is more than one who you fancy, you can choose two or three; it doesn't matter. That is a special right exclusive to you. Then, if you wish to try making real rune knights, you can go ahead; just one for now, no more, but I'll provide you with the candidate, the mount, and the materials. After all that is done, I'll more or less be able to prepare the sacrifice offerings for you entering the Church of the Eternal Dragon. You can see what the Dragon God graces you with."

Richard noted everything down diligently, and Gaton thought it over before he continued, "That woman Sharon still owes me a



favour. She promised to help once with a ceremony at the Church of the Eternal Dragon. Since I don't need any urgent blessings from the Church, let's use the chance on you! I'll write her a letter to see how she can help.

"Now I don't think there's anything else. Your residence should be ready for you. You can also move around Faust as you wish, there aren't any areas restricted to you, but do be careful if you go downtown. Enemies are everywhere here, but there shouldn't be any issue in public areas. Those old men may be very cunning, but few of them would actually be willing to risk their lives to fight. Just don't be seduced by girls with unknown backgrounds and follow them into secluded alleys." Gatón laughed, stopping only when he saw no reaction from Richard. Clearing his throat, he concluded, "Last but most importantly, spend more time looking around at your sisters; most of them are still on this island. As long as they do not have actual partners, you are free to appoint them as yours."

Richard frowned, asking, "Can't we let this matter lie?"

Gatón let out a laugh again, though his tone was firm and resolute. "No. This is the duty of every single Archeron. In any case, partners don't actually restrict you in any way. You can just take it as...a form of continuing the bloodline."

"I am not an Archeron," Richard replied coldly.

"You cannot abandon your blood. It is one with you, a part of your very soul. That goes for your silvermoon blood, and for your Archeron blood as well. Besides, I don't think you have the right yet to reject your duties." Gatón was calm this time around, a total opposite of Richard. It made him realise that he did indeed have no right to reject Gatón's words, so he fell silent.

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Back at his residence, Richard threw himself directly onto his bed, staring at the ceiling above. As with every meeting he'd had

with Gaton in the past, this was yet another unpleasant encounter. Regardless of occasion, no matter the circumstances, they had never had a happy meeting. All he saw in Gaton's presence was the image of his old house burning in the raging flames.

Truth be told, he'd always had questions in his mind. Why did his mother live in Rooseland village for an entire decade? Why would she rather set herself on fire than meet his father? Recounting his childhood memories, and adding them to all his new experiences, he knew clearly that his mother had loved Gaton very much.

This was what left Richard conflicted, and the reason he accepted all of Gaton's help despite his own inner struggles. It was only today that he'd finally understood the true meaning of his mother's final wish.

Elena actually still wished to be together with Gaton, but her method was just different. It was one almost impossible to accomplish, but her pride was no less than that of any Archeron.

The three traditions of the Archerons suddenly swept past Richard's mind, stirring his heart. It was almost as though he could see the flames and blood, the scene of every Archeron in the past centuries fighting valiantly in battle. People fell without end, but the others stood back up yet again. Their ancient and mysterious blood was awakened in the raging inferno of battle, continuing to be passed on with the first cry of every newborn. This was a struggle, an unyielding spirit of battle. The Archeron blood would continue to live and spread, just as how the volcano that was its final resting place spurted lava without end.

The only reason there were few tombstones on the volcano was because only Archerons who'd been enlightened with the power of their blood had the right to rest in their family cemetery. As for those who rested at the top, the six Archerons who'd awakened their truenames, they'd irrefutably been heroes in their lifetimes. Even though their lives weren't documented on the tombstones,

the mere presence of the truename explained it all.

Just like Gaton.

It was already dark outside. The pale blue fourth moon hung high in the night sky, its azure light spilling through the tall and narrow windows. The trees and mountains outside seemed a faint shade of indigo bathed within.

The unsheathed sword was sat by the bedside, its blade reflecting the blue moonlight. Sparkling stars seemed to jump in the reflection of the blade, a beautiful illusion with a trace of the blue moon's power. The faint presence of the moonforce hazily awakened the silvermoon elven blood within Richard's body.

He didn't know why, but he was exceptionally sensitive to the blue moon. When Gaton had used the secret sword of the fourth moon, Annihilation exuded a sad yet beautiful determination, one that made him feel like Elena was right in front of him. His father had said this was a sword he'd seen his mother use, then under what circumstances had she used a technique that would end in mutual destruction?

The numerous events of the day had finally tired Richard out, and he fell into a deep slumber under the azure moonlight.

Richard saw the Rainbow of the Moons in his dreams. He also saw the volcano erupt, Archerons rushing past him one by one as they roared their way into the battlefield. The road under their feet was naught but endless skeletons, and a river of blood. Fog filled the air, and plane after plane floated into his sight with countless people risking life and limb for their control. Sometimes a plane exploded and collapsed, completely destroyed and sinking into the endless abyss away from the haze.

There was no sky, no earth. Outside of the endless massacres was an endless void...

Richard was suddenly awakened from the dream. Rubbing his

eyes, he was greeted by dazzling sunlight outside the window. His difficult escape from the chaotic dream left his mind and body equally exhausted.

It was a brand new day, but Richard suddenly recalled that today seemed to be the day when he was supposed to meet his siblings.

# Book 1, Chapter 76 - Banquet

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The hands of the magic clock indicated nightfall, and Faust was shrouded in the shades of dusk. Nighttime in the city of legends wasn't the normal black and white, instead being bright and colourful. The fourth and fifth moon hung high on either end of the sky, the soft blue and violet mingling together to illuminate the night.

If one were to walk out of Faust's gates and look up at the night sky of the Eternal Plains, the two moons would be much more distant. Perhaps because of that distance the colour of the moonlight was unable to make it across the great distance, leaving night in Norland a black and white affair.

The belts of light hung high overhead, revolving ever so slowly along their wondrous orbits. The seven moons followed along in a certain pattern, but humans had never been able to understand the secret behind the Rainbow of the Moons even since they settled in Faust. Tonight was the turn of the pale blue and violet moons to illuminate the sky, so the two were duller in the rainbow. Yet, no matter when it was, the gold moon was always the dimmest of all. Throughout the year, with the exception of a few days, people could hardly even spot its presence.

Surrounding the cloud layer of Faust was an incomparably large spell formation that kept the city tropical throughout the seasons, regardless of the harsh cold in the Eternal Plains. Threads of magic light could occasionally be seen through the mist, indicating its presence, and countless of these very same threads coloured the clouds like a splendid rainbow. It made Faust's night dazzling.

The higher islands were floating around in a lonesome silence, but the sixth and seventh layers were bustling with activity. Every building was brightly lit, indicating that this was a place where the most powerful families of the Sacred Alliance converged. Countless conspiracies and deals were hatched with every passing minute,

and these exchanges were often carried out at private rooms or banquets. Thus, there were many private rooms in every building of every island, and banquets of all sorts were held every night. Even the Archerons were no exception to this.

The banquet that particular night was neither large nor small. It was held in a tower outside the castle, close to the edge of their island.

This three-storey building was originally designed for larger parties or gatherings, with even a garden built outside according to common aristocratic tradition. The north wings of the first and second floors were essentially big multi-purpose rooms, divided into several smaller areas by the activity they were meant for. On the other hand, the south wing contained rooms of various sizes. Half of the third floor was an interior balcony facing the island, and the roof was designed like a sky deck so the participants could enjoy a view of the other floating islands as well as Faust itself.

Currently, all of the separate areas in the north wing on the lower levels had been combined into one hall. The place was brightly lit, and long tables which lined up on either side of the area full with plates of food. Maids and servants were going around, delivering cup after cup of red wine to the participants before collecting their empty glasses.

There was a musical band who was performing with great fervour in the corner, though the performance did not seem so great. In any case the guests were more concerned about the chance to interact with one another than the music or any exquisite wine.

Eight rooms of varying sizes had been opened behind the winding corridor outside the hall, with more on the second level. These private spaces provided a necessary convenience for those who wanted a private word or intimate exchange with someone. That being said, though, many actually preferred the lush outdoor garden for the latter. Even though there was a higher chance of

being seen, it was much more exciting. Besides, most people did not care if anyone was watching anyway.

The banquet this night was for the younger generation of the Archerons, and Gaton and his thirteen did not show up at all. The youths were gathered together in twos and threes, exchanging pleasantries with one another while enjoying the food and wine. Needless to say they only discussed casual or partially overt topics here, with actual negotiations and deals taking place only in the rooms provided or other private rooms.

There were many families other than the fourteen of Faust who had settled down or set up contact points on the ground in the main city. However, the fourteen were the sole occupants of the floating islands, being true aristocrats with access to privileges above the rest. Although the Archerons were viewed as upstarts, it was still a symbol of high status to be able to receive an invitation to an Archeron Family party. All of the families in Faust clearly recognised the Archerons' military capability, especially after Gaton conquered both the seventh and third islands of the lowest level single-handedly.

Having spent all their money on their plans to make use of the Archerons and stop upstarts from joining Faust, the ancient families had grown divided. Many had turned towards Gaton and tried to rope him in, attempting to reel in this beast by trying to have him attack targets outside the Alliance.

It was only after Gaton had successfully established a presence in Faust that the Archerons appeared more like a family clan. Many Archerons who were on expeditions had sent youths from their branches to Faust. This would allow them to broaden their horizons, and would keep them secure and give them more opportunities to develop. Ultimately, that meant more opportunities to choose partners as well. However, those willing to send their youths here were not doing very well on the mainland. Those who were basking in their own limelight wouldn't even pay

attention to Gaton. Instead, some of these successful Archerons even accelerated their pace of expansion, rather keen on replacing him.

There were about a few dozen or so young Archerons in the hall, but Richard was not amongst them. He was at the top floor, in a smaller hall where the true party was being held.

This banquet hall made up for its small size with the unique style of its furnishing. The floors and walls here are adorned with volcanic lava, while the light in the room came from torches burning on the walls. Every decoration was made of metal or stone, with the wall hangings and curtains typical of aristocrats completely missing from the scene. The room was extremely hot, and had a mild hint of sulphur in the air. It was similar to the volcanic environment in the clan's cemetery, but not as extreme in terms of the heat and its harsh conditions.

There were four young men and nine young ladies standing in the banquet hall other than Richard, all between the ages of thirteen and eighteen. They'd naturally formed three separate groups, all appearing very familiar with one another. Two of Richard's half-brothers and three of his half-sisters were here, with the rest being youths from branch families. The commonality amongst them all was that none of them had a partner yet.

The youths conversed with ease, the topics being nothing more than war and sex. This banquet was meant to gather them together so they could choose their partners. This was because, although Gaton's two other sons Warren and Wennington as well as his two adult daughters Venica and Demi had the right to choose their own partners as well, this was limited by certain boundaries. If they spotted someone they liked they had to first inform the higher-ups of the family, who would ultimately decide if that pairing would be allowed.

On the other hand, Richard who was standing in the corner could choose a partner at will. Thus, they all knew that he was the main



character here. That was also what made him one of the only two people who did not fit in with the crowd.

As for the other? It was a girl who looked rather delicate and weak, seated quietly on a sofa in a corner of the room.

# Book 1, Chapter 77 - Banquet

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Formal attire was a must during occasions like this, and the combination of red and black seemed to be an unspoken decision amongst all the Archerons. These two colours represented sulphur and lava, the very symbol of the Archeron bloodline. Almost every Archeron was fond of blazing temperatures and the stench of sulphur, because they represented the purity and richness of one's bloodline as well as the onset of bloodline abilities.

Only two people here weren't all that keen about the event: Richard, and that frail-looking girl in the corner.

On Richard's part, he felt uncomfortable with all the eyes almost boring into him, whether the gazes were obvious or not. Another reason for his discomfort was the intense volcanic ballroom. After all, it was his elven bloodline that had awakened first.

But were these other people really that fond of volcanoes? It seemed to him that only Wennington, Venica, and Demi were in the process of having their bloodlines awakened here, and the extreme temperature was becoming apparent. Many people were showing signs of discomfort— beads of sweat were rolling down their necks, and there was a tense expression in their faces.

A trueblood Archeron would feel nothing in a ballroom of 40 degrees. Richard, who'd already awoken his bloodline with Eruption, was a good example. Even standing near the mouth of the volcano in the family tombs with Gaton he was rather unaffected by the heat.

However, he personally wasn't too fond of heat. It was near 70 degrees where he was standing! The other people in the room were just putting on a pretense, as if they had pure bloodlines themselves. It was common behaviour in many families with a long history, as many strived their hardest to act like truebloods to gain the favour of the family heads.

Gaton had risen like a comet, and was now like the brightest star in the night sky. If the choice of emblem was a volcano, then these people would act like they could die for anything related. And what better to represent volcanoes than high temperature and the smell of sulphur?

There was an answer to that question— lava. But of course, none of these rats would actually throw themselves into lava. Richard was filled with derision as he scanned through the ballroom.

His eyes landed on the girl again, holding there for a while before he looked away. The fault wasn't his— she was wearing a long white gown in a sea of black and red. Even if she didn't accessorise much, she was really eye-catching.

Information about her floated up in his mind: Coco Millie Archeron. Age 16, 1.67 metres tall, and a level 2 illusionist. She was the daughter of Pierre Archeron, titled cavalryman and level 10 warrior with an elementary double rune of strength and defense. He was the current vice-captain of Blackrose Castle's guard.

Richard furrowed his brows at this information. Coco was of the lowest status of anyone present here, only present because of her father being a titled cavalryman. Even that was rather forced, given that he was only level 10. The only reason he had a title was likely his long service to the Blackrose. This title could not be inherited. His measly achievements indicated that this Pierre wasn't courageous enough to fight on the battlefield, if not he could have been a titled knight that had the potential to reach at least level 13.

Pierre's real intention in sending Coco to Faust was apparent. He wanted her to marry a man with status and power, and if luck permitted, give birth to an Archeron of purer blood. However, Richard saw at first sight that a mere level 2 illusionist at 16 years of age meant she had no talent at magic. Her physique revealed even more that she wasn't suited to melee either. Thus, the only thing she had left was her bloodline, but Richard didn't find that to

be quite rich either. Her father was incapable of awakening any bloodline abilities in her, and she seemed to have inherited her mother's weak physique.

It had been a year since Coco had come to Faust, and given her status she could only be delegated to a marriage that she had no right to resist. If she refused to follow through with the first of the ancient traditions, she would be banished immediately from the Archerons, so she may as well follow through with protocol.

That being said, however, not every Archeron would be designated to a marriage. Once a partner had been decided, the family had to provide a certain amount of support to ensure both parties raised their strength and produced better offspring. Coco was a pretty girl, her soft features and tender aura plucking at the heartstrings of many, but her weak build left her without a partner despite a year spent in Faust.

The Archeron bloodline was known to be fierce and violent. Hundreds of years of arranged marriages had made it clear that one needed two powerful parents to have a child with a greater chance of awakening their bloodline. It was also found out that it was easiest to give birth to offspring with pure bloodlines if direct family tied the knot— especially those with truenames.

Coco wasn't either, and that explained why she wasn't chosen by any of the ambitious Archerons. The leaders would have taken this into consideration as well, so they hadn't appointed her to someone themselves.

Richard looked at the people in the ballroom once again, focusing on his half-siblings. He had long gotten a hold of the information on everyone attending this banquet.

Warren, 14, level 5 archer; Wennington, 14, level 8 blaze guardian; Venica, 14, level 7 blaze warrior. Demi, 15, level 10 cursemaster.

Apart from Warren, who was slightly weaker than the rest, it

could be said that none of them paled in comparison to Richard. Wennington and Venica were already showing signs of their bloodlines awakening, their attacks also inflicting damage of the fire element. Moreover, Demi's talent in magic was astonishing. Richard would have been able to match her level if he'd focused on magic instead of runecrafting, but a mage's role and power weren't the same as that of a cursemaster.

But of course, Richard was the star in this ballroom. A personal apprentice of the master of the Deepblue, level 8 mage who was also a runemaster, and he possessed the eye-catching appearance that came from his elven bloodline that set him apart from the rest.

Furthermore, Gaton had personally evaluated Richard's bloodline to be on par with his own. That was insane in itself. It was no longer a secret that Gaton had a truename, which meant that Richard would ultimately have his own truename on top of being a runemaster.

This explained Venica and Demi boring into him with hawkish gazes. Both of them were tall, their appearance leaning more towards the paternal side of their genes, as well as hot and flirtatious. They were wearing near-identical evening dresses with plunging necklines, tailored to the simplest cut with nothing unnecessary to cover up their beautiful curves. Not only did the dresses bring out their stunning breasts, the high slits in the dress also showed off their alluring legs. This was especially true of Venica. Although she was a year younger than Demi, becoming a fighter had contributed to her voluptuous bosom that looked like it would fall out of her dress.

# Book 1, Chapter 78 - Banquet

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Wennington was very calm as he watched Richard, also observing the other young ladies. It was Warren who looked at him strangely, his gaze containing an undeniable envy and some hatred as well. There was another boy from a branch family here who was on par with Warren in capability and age, but he seemed far more reserved with it. All three of them were obviously interested in Demi and Venica, as well as another beautiful and provocative young lady that attracted a lot of attention.

Not one of them paid any attention to Coco. Taking her to be one's partner was almost resigning oneself to tragedy— in a world of power, beauty was the most worthless thing of all.

Conversely, both Venica and Demi had the right to choose their partners, and Demi was a key interest in the family as well. She'd demonstrated outstanding talent at a young age, and with a decisive calmness to her she seemed to many to be the next Alice.

This went even further with Richard. In the mere two days since his arrival people were already discussing the possibility of him becoming the next Gaton. Needless to say it was openly acknowledged that he might never be able to reach his father's level of power, but the fact that he would become a runemaster would certainly get one's blood pumping.

The two were entirely different prospects altogether. Richard didn't need to prove himself in combat— his identity as a runemaster alone was enough to suppress all the youths present in this hall for a relatively long time.

Ordinary runemasters could gear up two to three elementary rune knights. If one were to make a simple comparison of power—the sale of one of these rune knights would make up the cost of manufacturing, and even one of the remaining would be able to wipe out the entire batch of youths here easily. This was an

exceptional battle ability of its own kind.

Every young lady in the hall was rather beautiful in general, while the young lads shone in valiance. Venica and Demi were all the more charismatic amongst them, due to their parentage and prowess. This was particularly so for Demi, as indifference could evoke the carnal desires deep within men. Her shapely legs and curvaceous figure also made it clear that her performance on the other battlefield— the bed— would be very much comparable to her gift at battle.

Richard stood alone in a corner, holding onto a glass of wine. He occasionally loosened his collar to get some fresh air. He was not afraid of high temperatures, but he didn't exactly like the smell of sulphur, and disliked formal occasions like this one even more. The evening suit that he was clad in had cost approximately a thousand gold, and was sewn personally by a top-notch tailor specially recruited by the family's housekeeper. Richard's distinctive charm was brought out to the fullest in this attire, a product of his elvish and Archeron blood mixing together. Yet, it only made Richard miss his own magic robes more.

He really liked his robes for the enchantments they had on them. During battles they could enhance one's concentration despite the chaos, increasing their chances of finishing a spell successfully. As this was a permanent enhancement, it was extremely expensive. Though it did not have much practical use outside of actual combat, its price was more than ten times than the enhancements for stored battle-type magic. Thus, few would choose to get it. However, this was the most important enhancement to Richard, and that was simply because it could further improve his accuracy in runecrafting.

Richard was already used to living and working under the effect of that specific enchantment, and with the suit lacking it the change felt particularly uncomfortable. An article of clothing made by a top-notch tailor was only worth about a thousand gold, but

that robe of Richard's was worth at least ten times as much. This was the difference in costs between the world of magic and the ordinary world, one that could never be bridged.

Disinterested, Richard swirled the wine in his glass, letting the scarlet liquid swish around the insides of the cup. At the same time, he silently began to calculate the time. It had only been slightly more than half an hour since the banquet had begun. This meant that there was still at least another two and a half hours before this ordeal was over. This duration was already equivalent to the amount of time Richard usually took for a meditation session, which was at least a tenth of a point increase in his mana reserves.

There weren't many shortcuts to increase one's mana or energy. One had to rely on perseverance and determination, improving gradually over an endless stretch of time. This also meant that if Richard were to do nothing but meditate for thirty years continuously, he would become a great mage purely in terms of his mana. Of course, there was barely any one who could continuously meditate for thirty years, but the meditation technique that Richard was using currently was already close to Norland's best. Nothing would come close to anything passed down from the Deepblue.

When he passed level 10 he would be able to begin learning the beginning portions of Sharon's personal meditation technique, the Deepblue Fantasy. When he reached the level of his professors he would be able to practice the Deepblue Dream. Finally, once he stepped into the legendary realm himself, he would be able to practice the Deepblue Aria. Only after stepping out of the Deepblue had Richard realised exactly what it meant to be Sharon's personal apprentice.

With far too much to be done to fulfill his goals, and things constantly pressing for his attention, Richard was obsessed with time. Despite the strong purpose and atmosphere of his banquet,



he couldn't bring himself to be enthusiastic at all.

In fact, it was not too much of a commitment to choose a partner. More often than not they just ended up being people who shared a bed, going their separate ways after a descendant was born. Richard had long since become a man, so he naturally wasn't repulsed by woman or resist them either. Moreover, Demi and Venica each had their own attractive qualities, and the rest of the girls were not too bad either. As a partner in bed, they were definitely above the standard. Yet, there was a reason for him to reject the idea of choosing a partner. This entire process was situated with the Archerons, a family Gatton represented.

Richard did not make any move, but that did not mean that the rest did not as well. The youth from a branch family had long since gotten intimate with two girls who also came from branches. Intentionally or otherwise, they brushed past one another at their sensitive zones, and remained wise enough not to attempt to partner with someone of higher status than them. The youth was only able to have one partner, though both girls were vying for him. The youth's capability and bloodline was considerably good, therefore he was naturally their best option.

The Archeron Family had been on countless quests in the past hundreds of years, and many grown men had died on the battlefield. Thus, there were fewer men in the family than women. Additionally, their ancient bloodline made it a lot harder for them to procreate than normal humans.

In Norland, an average human's lifespan was around 70 years, while the pregnancy period was 6 months. An average woman could give birth to three children in two years. However, it took an average of three years before Archerons could possibly conceive a child. Together with the pregnancy period, it would take nearly four years for a child to be born. The six-fold increase of birth time may not seem significant in the short term, but if one were to look broadly at the period of sixteen years from when a child reached

adulthood, all of this would translate into the fact that every Archeron couple would only be able to give birth to four descendants, while others give birth to twenty-four! As the second generation grew up to become adults and began procreation, this gap would only continue to widen. A century later, the gap would be impossible to bridge.

When it came to war, either on the continent or in the various other planes of existence, the population of a community was always an important factor. Even if the peak of a civilization's power was able to transcend the boundaries of time, the efficacy would be limited. No matter how formidable any inheritance was, it would need to be passed down and sustained for generations through the bloodline. Thus, this gave rise to the Archerons' ancient yet divine first rule.

As a means to remedy this, every Archeron also had many non-Archeron partners as well. This increased their chance of having children, but diluted the ancient bloodline as well. The ancestors hoped that, with the sheer number of children born in that way, there was some chance of a child with a particularly strong bloodline. Richard himself was an example of its success.

Not only would procreating take up a lot of time, it also would cause the mother's power to decline significantly. The more gifted a child was, the greater the extent by which the mother's power would decline. Of course a strong mother would weaken less, but that only applied to those like Demi and Alice who demonstrated outstanding ability at a young age. For ordinary Archeron women, their social status would be determined by the child they gave birth to. If they had given birth to a child who could meet the basic requirements of unleashing the inherited ability in their veins upon adulthood, the clan would then reward her with a well-provided life and the right to a second chance of choosing her partner.

And this time it was a choice, instead of being forced. Many

fortunate Archeron women had climbed up society in this way, or found men with whom to live for the rest of their lives as their second partner.

# Book 1, Chapter 79 - Invitation

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The two young girls soon started to fight over the youth openly. Although only the more talented youths had the right to choose their partners, if a willing couple applied to be given to each other the request would be granted unless someone with such a right interfered. The number of such youths in the family was limited.

This was even more true of those with the right to choose multiple partners. Even if Wennington, Demi, and Venica had two choices because of their talent and parentage, their choices still needed to go through higher authority in the family. Richard was the only special one here, with the right to choose whomsoever he desired. If he chose someone like Venica, her rights would automatically be waived. His position allowed him to overlook the laws set within the family.

Just as Richard was immersed in his train of thought, he saw Demi leave the group of people surrounding her and suddenly walking towards him.

“I’m Demi, I can be considered your younger sister.”

“Richard.”

Demi was almost as tall as Richard himself. Her crimson hair was coiled up, and there was a blazing flame ignited in the depths of her pupils, a sign of her bloodline awakening. It was quite rare for any Archeron to awaken their bloodline at a mere fifteen years of age.

The girl was also gorgeous, her arrogance only adding to the charm of her figure. That arrogance was not unfounded— she did possess great power. She wasn’t just any level 10 mage, instead a cursemaster which was very rare.

Necromancy was a branch of magic. Cursemasters were weak at the start of their training, but proceeded to grow increasingly

strong over time. Past level 10 they could easily keep up with mages of the same level. Their best abilities were at reducing an opponent's power and distracting them. Unless one had extremely strong mana reserves, anyone who met a cursemaster would get a headache. At level 10 cursemasters could even unleash group attacks, which only served to show how truly terrifying they were on the battlefield.

Demi looked straight into Richard's eyes as she stood so close to him her breasts almost came in contact. Her chest shifted up and down as she breathed, occasionally brushing against Richard as she spoke in a slightly husky voice.

"Richard, I've been following Father to planar battles for a year now, and am now a qualified mage in the army. You should already know of my strength through the profiles you've been given," she said proudly.

Richard was shocked by her words. She'd followed Gaton into the planes at such a young age? Real battlefields were unpredictable, everchanging. A strong army could be distracted from protecting her on the battlefield, and mages were a priority target second only to clerics.

It was only then that Richard fully understood Demi's arrogance. The girl was full of potential, and she was very wild. A true Archeron.

He carefully examined her as per habit, but due to their proximity couldn't take in her entire body. When he looked down his vision was occupied by her breasts, the data on them growing prominent to him. As per habit as a runemaster, he classified them on a scale of one to seven.

Demi's breasts were an undoubted 4, while Venica was closer to 5. As for 6 and 7, even if they weren't only present in legends like equivalent runes he hadn't seen any yet.

However, he'd known trouble was coming when Demi

approached. He stopped all these weird thoughts, replying politely, “Yes, I was quite surprised when I saw your profile. Cursemasters are quite rare— if one doesn’t have the gift it will be hard to bring out the true power of their spells. Pardon me, but if I’m not wrong you’ve already awakened a bloodline ability, no?”

“Yes. My bloodline ability increases the effectiveness of my spells,” Demi said with pride.

Richard was surprised once more, reevaluating the girl in front of him. Bloodlines were divided into greater and lesser in the world, and the same held true for the abilities they granted. The common classification in Norland had four different types of bloodline— A lesser bloodline, an intermediate bloodline, a greater bloodline, and a legendary bloodline. The classification was based on the level and number of powers one’s bloodline could grant. Lower bloodlines only granted three or less, but each descendant had a greater chance of unlocking their powers. A middle bloodline could get between three and ten, while greater bloodlines could awaken even more types. As for legendary bloodlines, they only came from ancient, horrifying creatures. The chance of awakening such a bloodline was as low as advancing to the legendary realm. At least in the Sacred Alliance, there was not a single family with a legendary bloodline.

Normally one could only unlock a single bloodline ability. A few lucky souls could have two or three, but they were usually born into lower bloodlines anyway. The higher the grade of one’s bloodline, the lower the chance of awakening. This also corresponded with the plane’s rules, creating a pyramid of survival.

Bloodline abilities in Norland were divided into seven categories themselves, just like runes were. They were ranked in order of power and number of uses, with levels 6 and 7 basically existing only in legends. From their usage, they could be divided into skills, talents, and special powers. Skills were most common, referring to

things that increased one's ability when called upon. This included those like Richard's own Eruption, which could increase one's strength and speed by half a fold to a fold. Eruption was normally just a level 1 power, but in Richard's case it was strong enough to be level 2.

Talents were far rarer, and correspondingly much stronger as well. This was similar to Demi's increased spell effects, falling into level 3 as an ability. There were many similar to this in the category, such as increased spell damage, increased penetration of spells, accelerated casting, and the like. The best talent of all was penetration, which reduced the effects of an opponent's resistance to magic, but the increased damage was good as well. As for other talents like silent casting and instant casting, they were categorised as level 4 and 5 due to their rarity.

Special powers were extremely rare and strong, most at level 4 or above. One example was Sharon's greater summoning, which empowered her summoning spells greatly enough to boost her power by a level or two. It was extremely close to being a level 6 ability.

However, in comparison to the billions of people in Norland, the number of families with a special bloodline was less than a tenth. Besides, having a powerful bloodline didn't mean being able to awaken it. Take the Archerons for example—in their centuries of existence less than a thousand tombstones had made it to the family tombs. This showed how rare it was to awaken one's bloodline. However, this also made families with special bloodlines superior to the rest. Even for the Archerons, with the difficulty of awakening their bloodlines, they'd become so accomplished in a mere few centuries of existence.

But then again, one's bloodline wasn't everything. Even if one had the best bloodline abilities like greater summoning, a level 15 warrior could easily kill a level 10 mage with one stroke. Even if one could summon a level 7 storm bear instead of a level 5 boar,

even if they could summon multiple, the warrior would slaughter them in the blink of an eye.



# Book 1, Chapter 80 - Invitation

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Demi had both looks and talent, was gifted yet diligent, and possessed the courage to take risks as well. If nothing went wrong in the future, she would grow up to be comparable to one of Gaton's knights. A young lady like her was worthy of respect and admiration.

“My ability is Eruption,” Richard stated in response.

All of the youths had actually focused their attention on Richard and Demi. Many of them looked envious on hearing that he'd unleashed his ability as well, but Wennington and Venica didn't have much of a reaction. Even though the two of them didn't have their own abilities unlocked yet, they were quite close. Besides, as fire-related classes their abilities were quite likely to fall under the category of fire-based damage. Any such ability would exceed Richard's Eruption in level.

On the other hand, Warren's face was full of jealousy and disdain. He even grunted under his breath, “Bah, just Eruption!” Although the rest might not have noticed it, Richard clearly heard the boy. Still, he pretended not to have heard anything. While Eruption was a common and average ability, Warren himself hadn't unlocked his own. As for the hatred and jealousy Warren had towards him, Richard didn't take that to heart either. Not every Archeron was a hard-working genius that could work together with the rest. That schism was in fact something that governed the family.

“Eruption?” Demi was stumped for a moment, with her brows slightly creased, “That isn't really compatible with your class. That's really unlucky, but it's not too much of a concern. What's most important is that you are a runemaster, so it doesn't matter if your ability is wasted. You were unlucky this time, but good luck for the future!”

“Thank you!” Richard raised his glass in toast, taking a small sip.

One normally unlocked their ability after they chose their class. If it matched their class well it would strengthen their powers, with Sharon and Demi being perfect examples. A lot of families took care of this— if the family’s inherited abilities were all melee or related to warriors, the younger generation would mostly choose corresponding classes.

However, that wasn’t viable with more powerful bloodlines, with abilities encompassing both melee and magic or even divinity. Although they may be inclined towards a certain domain, the children of the family needed some luck when choosing their class at a young age.

In the case of the Archerons, it was widely known that half the abilities were magical and the other half melee, with nothing related to divinity at all. Thus, when a child of the Archerons was choosing their class, it was like they were flipping a coin for their ability.

There were many cases in history of people changing classes after unlocking an exceptionally powerful ability. Generally speaking, one would contemplate their future direction if they unlocked something past level 3, and it became absolutely worth it at level 4.

Richard was an example of failed luck, at least for now. Demi’s wish of good luck hinted at the possibility of him unleashing a second ability, a wish with good intentions behind it. As charming as she already was, this only served to leave Richard with an even better impression of her.

Wennington walked over as well, glass in hand. He smiled, “Eruption? I want this marvellous skill as well! I already took the leap of faith in choosing my class, but without my ability unleashed yet I don’t know whether it’s compatible as I hope. If I get something like a level 2 magic ability it’ll be a real headache.

“Also, Demi, Eruption isn’t as useless as you think for Richard.

On the battlefield, it'll serve a great purpose."

"You have a point," Demi nodded in agreement after a moment's consideration. One of the most difficult things for a mage was to preserve their life on the battlefield. Unquestionably, Eruption would be able to allow one to escape death much faster in times of danger. As for runemasters, their importance far outstripped that of mages. Runemasters of a higher level had the right to retreat from the battlefield at any time at their own discretion.

"Alright then Richard, since you're already a runemaster can you make any magic-related runes?" Demi asked. She knew that most elementary runemasters were only able to craft a few of the standard runes.

Richard went silent for a moment, before speaking again, "I actually can make one that boosts mana, but it's weaker than a second grade rune. Are you interested?"

Demi's eyes lit up, "A mana boost? Is it a custom rune? How much is the effect?"

"Mm, and the effect is between 13 and 15%. I'll only know the standard after the rune is complete."

Demi's eyes lit up even further as she cried out, "An enhancement rate this high with a fluctuation range this small?" She clearly had an ample amount of understanding on mana boost runes. Standard second grade runes fluctuated between 15% and 22%, which meant this custom elementary rune was comparable to one of the poorer second grade runes. Yet, this rune required far less capacity to carry.

A mana boost was identical to an increase in mana conservation. An enhancement of 15% would allow Demi, with about 400 points of mana, to cast an extra fourth grade curse. This increase in battle capacity would be similar to what a magic effectiveness rune would grant her. At the same time, this enhancement was relative to her own strength, only increasing as she grew in power.

Richard nodded his head in acknowledgement.

Demi took a deep breath, and stuck her impressive chest out before saying, “I want this rune! But I don’t want it to be a rune slot, I want it tattooed directly on my body. I can already withstand any elementary rune.”

Her words sounded like she was hinting at something in particular, which made Richard feel somewhat strange. He cast a casual detection spell on her body, a basic diagnostic test runemasters used to learn where to attach their runes. He actually didn’t need the spell to gauge the location, but used it to confirm his suspicions, because the location was simply inconceivable.

The detection spell flashed past Demi, and in Richard’s perception the entire area from her chest to her lower abdomen lit up in response. That was the only region where she could have runes tattooed.

Richard suddenly felt Demi’s fervent gaze on him, which made him rather reluctant to look her in the eye. This was now another sort of invitation altogether.

“Venica, don’t you need a rune too?” Demi turned around and beckoned Venica over. Venica strode forward and looked at Richard before saying, “I want a direct tattoo as well. As for the rune, an elementary agility will be enough. I’ll change it in the future.”

Yet another detection spell was cast, this time on Venica’s body. In response, the magic waves covered her back all the way to her thighs. Richard could sense a headache coming his way.

Wennington chuckled before saying, “Even I’m getting a little jealous of you now, Richard! How about this, help me with a rune as well and I won’t resent you any further. I’ll give you the materials, so you can charge me a lower price for labour. However, I want a slot. Don’t get me wrong on this, but I’m different from the girls.”

Wennington's words, particularly his emphasis on the invitation from the two girls, were practically adding fuel to the flames. This caused Richard's headache to worsen.

Thankfully, the youths began to discuss planar wars shortly after, the discussion growing so heated Richard could barely get a word into the conversation. Although Demi was the only one who had truly participated in battles, Wennington and Venica had a lot of related knowledge too. Their zeal for combat was simply startling as well. In some sense, Richard felt like these people in front of him were battle-crazed lunatics.

Warren did not join in on the conversation. It was evident that he hated Richard even more now, perhaps even abhorred him. Demi who'd been beside him had gone over to Richard on her own, and then even took Venica away as well. At the moment, the both of them were seducing him ever so blatantly, while that damned Richard actually barely even responded! To make things worse, Venica and Demi had no intention of giving up! Any straight man would surrender in the end to their persistent ways of seduction.

Warren downed the wine, glass after glass, but the scarlet liquid tasted more acrid than ever. A young lady beside him was trying to talk to him, but he was not paying attention to any of it. The fiery rage burning in his heart had already blinded him to anything other than Richard, Demi, and Venica.

# Book 1, Chapter 81 - Conspiracy

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Luckily, Gaton didn't choose a partner for Richard himself after the banquet. In fact, the father-son pair almost never met if not for special occasions and events.

Richard was assigned to a rather small room near the family library, a place where he spent most of his days undisturbed. He flipped through dozens of books that illustrated the history of the continents, or the doctrines of different faiths.

Of course this was no deterrence to Venica and Demi. The two had visited the very next day, but thankfully they hadn't stayed for long because they had an important asceticism course to attend. He thanked lady luck, because they didn't bother him for the next four or five days.

Their second visit was focused on a discussion about runes. The two girls were beyond excited to witness the crafting of such an amazing thing first hand. Before Richard could drive them away with an excuse of not having enough ingredients, the girls suggested that he first 'familiarise' himself with the locations where he would have to tattoo the runes. This was an important tacit understanding between them.

That was a rather dangerous thing to accept. Were Richard to familiarise himself with them, he would need to be joined to both by marriage. It was law for all Archeron girls to remain virgins before their first partners, to maintain the purity of their children's lineage. Of course this wouldn't be in effect if they were marrying out of the family.

Dismissing the overly enthusiastic girls, Richard finally got some well-deserved rest for a few days. Other than one time where Wennington brought him the ingredients for his rune, Richard didn't meet anyone else. He couldn't care for the rest of the girls present at the banquet anyway. It didn't matter whether they were

qualified for him, or had let go of any ill thoughts regardless of their status to make moves on him.

It was like he was back in his days at the Deepblue. He drew up another schedule, as precise as a magic clock, and went about filling his mind up with tons of informations. Planar wars, the history of Faust, the Church of the Eternal Dragon... once he was done reading for a day, he didn't have much leisure time remaining— he still had to go about making Wennington's rune, planning his future equipment, and meditating.

Nonetheless, the peace was only on the surface. Elsewhere in Faust, undercurrents were rumbling.

The sixth floating island on the sixth layer was the territory of Duke Joseph. His family was amongst the top ten of the Sacred Alliance, neither advancing nor declining for a long time. And yet, it remained like an ancient oak tree, its foundation stabilised over the many years such that it was almost impossible to shake them. They were rooted deeply into the soil of the Sacred Alliance.

Joseph's family was vastly different from the Archerons on the third island of the seventh layer, who were brimming with war and conflict. His island, the sixth of the sixth, corresponded more to the aesthetics of human aristocrats and royalty. Centuries of efforts and hard work on this island that was a kilometer wider than the third of the seventh had made its architecture and greenery iconic.

Viewed from a vantage point, the whole island was shrouded in faint purple dome shield. It was rather hard to distinguish under Faust's brilliant sky, but if a foreign object strayed too close the shield would trigger and ripple outwards like a blooming flower.

The ground was mostly covered in lush vegetation, the leaves and grass crisp and green. Flowers bloomed and trees flourished at the prime of their lives under the constant tropical climate. Stepping on this island was like stepping into the legendary garden

of the gods, Clearwater. The buildings were evenly spread out and exuded an ancient elegance, surrounded by pergolas, pavilions and carefully trimmed thickets.

A stream flowed from the southwestern side of the island's mountain, emptying into a small lake at its foot. There was an ancient castle beside this body of water, and at the centre a field faintly lit by magic light that showed off an exquisite statue standing atop a beautiful fountain. It attracted the attention of all visitors.

Somewhere in the study of this castle, several calculative-looking men were seated in a row. They all looked sleek, the atmosphere filled with the power of their auras.

Before them was stood a lean aristocrat, who looked rather young in age. He was hugging a book close to his chest, seemingly looking for something within. The boy was dressed casually, and had a pair of crystal spectacles on. A pretty good-looking lad, one would say, that exuded wisdom and intelligence. The one downside was that he was a little skinny.

“Is this news confirmed?” he asked as he flipped through the pages of the book.

An experienced-looking middle-aged man on the far left spoke up, “We’ve already verified through many avenues that Richard Archeron is an elementary runemaster. But we’ve been unable to gather more information from the Deepblue, so his current standard is unknown. It’s bizarre; there’s exceptionally little information about the boy in the Deepblue. The traders were behaving quite strangely as well— they either said they didn’t know anything when asked, or only gave us trivial and unimportant information. None of us were able to get our hands on any details.”

“What more do you need? A runemaster at the mere age of 15, do we still need further verification?” another man quipped before



waving his hand aggressively, “Even if Richard remains at his current level his whole life, how many more rune knights will the Archerons have as he grows older? We should have killed him while we could! Even if he was only a mage, he deserved to be killed for studying at the Deepblue for 5 years! That means he’ll become a grand mage in the future!”

Someone who looked like a mage laughed, “You say that as if everything is so easy, Cybil. Do you think it’s easy to just kill him? Gaton sent that demon Mordred to pick Richard up! Even if you could locate them through the complex terrain, what price would you have to pay to kill Richard under his watch? What’s the point if this boy was just going to be a grand mage in the future? There are all sorts of capable people in every family, do you want to kill them all too? Or are you telling me you can kill Mordred? Nobody can do that if the man is set on running away. Don’t you think it’s too late for you to say all this, now that we know Richard is a runemaster?”

He laughed cynically before adding on, “Naseby, why don’t you take a team to kill Mordred? Getting rid of that demon would be much more useful than getting rid of a future runemaster!”

The man named Naseby flushed immediately and bellowed, “Kevin, what are you trying to say?”

The said mage only sneered, “I’m trying to say what you were trying to say just now! Since you have doubts about my planning, why not be of some help and lead your troops to do something? But perhaps Mordred is too tough for you to handle, just kill any of the other twelve knights of Gaton. Cyrden? Caryn? Lina, maybe?”

This was when the old man on the right end decided to speak out. “Kevin, Naseby! It’s pointless to fight now. It’s without a doubt that the Archerons birthed another talented lad. But currently, he only possesses talent. The issue is, how much priority should we put on him?”

The youth who stopped pacing around the room, raising his head, “Right, I almost forgot. Young master told me that Richard is planning to craft a rune that increases mana. That’s a custom built rune! You lot don’t think he’ll be able to craft a standard grade 2 rune, do you?”

“A custom rune?” Kevin exclaimed. He had substantial knowledge of runecrafting, so he continued on, “It seems like this Richard boy has a high chance of becoming a great runemaster in the future.”

This instantly quintupled Richard’s future value, He became the top threat amongst the younger generation of the Archerons, and one of the top ten within the entire family.

“I also found some interesting information about an auction a year ago.” The youth adjusted his glasses as he flipped through his book with grace and pointed to a line, “The most attractive item was an elementary agility rune. It could be compounded onto even a grade 3 rune slot, but the increment was upto 41%, reaching the standard of a second grade rune already. It was sold at a sky-high price of 5 million, which should be enough to prove its rarity. What’s interesting is that the Deepblue was the entity that put it up for auction.”

The young lad raised his head and smiled elegantly, “Now, we all know that Deepblue never produced runes before. It was almost impossible for ordinary runemasters to survive there given Sharon’s extreme expectations of rune quality and the hatred she has towards runemasters. So we can make a bold guess that this rune was likely produced by Richard. If that is true, then he does deserve our full efforts in getting rid of him. But even if it isn’t, it is a worthy price to pay as well for a future runemaster.”

He paused for a while before smiling, “Everything that we’re able to give right now will only be seen as another huge price in the eyes of the Joseph clan.”

Everyone got it instantly: they had to get rid of Richard at all costs!

“Should we prepare for war?” Naseby asked. He looked bloodthirsty at the very mention of it, and although he still maintained his etiquette before the youth his body was already bursting with excitement.

The young lad closed the book and placed it gently on the table, speaking with confidence not befitting of his age, “No, not for now. Our fight with them now is beyond the battlefield. As long as we make this flawless, Gaton wouldn’t want to engage in a war either. He is a smart man, he knows that a war at this point in time won’t be beneficial for either of us. The only one who’ll gain from a war between us and the Archérons will be that old maggot Orelus. Gaton will wait, he will wait till the Archérons recover from this blow and till he gains an advantage against us. But...”

He smiled knowingly, “Time, might not be on Gaton Archéron’s side.”

# Book 1, Chapter 82 - Conspiracy

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The youth took out a leather scroll from a bookshelf after finishing his words, laying it on the table and unfurling it to reveal a map of Faust. It magically expanded upon his touch, becoming a three-dimensional model of the city of legends.

He lightly tapped on the third island of the seventh layer, “First we have to get our little Richard off this reeking island. And... Hmm, he definitely will want to check the Church of the Eternal Dragon, so this will be a good location. What do you think, Master Valen?”

The old man named Valen looked at where the youth had pointed, a place between the Church of the Eternal Dragon and the Teleportation Temple that was relatively quiet and peaceful. Of course, that relatively was important—because of how close it was to the city gates and the flight stops it still had quite a bit of traffic. Valen’s pupils constricted the moment he saw the place, and he nodded, “This is a great a place, but you have to be fast. Who are you sending?”

“Faulk, Faulk Joseph. He’s our best pick.” The young man answered without hesitation.

There was a subtle change in mood within the room, and Kevin even commented, “Faulk? Is that necessary?”

The young mad took out a white handkerchief and replied indifferently while wiping his hands, “Of course it’s necessary. Do you think Gaton will just give up if we send someone else? Those old foxes will see through our little plan, but we need to force him to tolerate it for now. That needs enough of a sacrifice on our part. He’ll be aware of what we’re doing, but we need to force him to deal with us at a later date. What we need now is time. Alright, Master Valen, I’ll leave persuading Faulk to you.”

“We will do as you ask,” the old man said with respect. He then

stood up, leaving with the rest of the men in tow.

The young man, Raymond Joseph the fourth son of Duke Joseph himself, did not like to be questioned after he'd made a decision. He was one of the three most powerful members of his family, having shown an affinity for both the planar wars and governing their territory. But that wasn't what he was known for— he'd recently defended his little baronage from the attacks of two Archeron viscounts!

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After a few boring days of continuous reading and meditation, Richard decided to take a stroll and match the streets of Faust to the information he'd read in his books. Downtown Faust was truly flourishing, with hundreds of alliances and many powerful groups and individuals trying to make a fortune or find something useful there. Truth be told, as long as one had enough gold in Faust, they could get almost anything they desired.

Demi and Venica had become a big downside to staying on the family island. It was growing increasingly difficult for him to ward off their aggressive advances, and they'd already started to end their classes early to visit him at least once a day. It wouldn't be long until they ended up becoming mates if this continued— the girls' ultimate goal.

These girls were different from normal Archeron women. Producing powerful offspring was only one facet of their considerations; they were more interested in participating in the planar wars alongside him.

That was why, when Warren invited Richard to visit the Church of the Eternal Dragon together, he'd agreed at once. Although it was rather bizarre for Warren to ask him out with his obvious hostility, he believed it was still logical to an extent. Who wouldn't want to build a good rapport with a fifteen-year-old runemaster? Any well-trained child of nobility had learnt to set aside their

personal feelings for the sake of interests and benefits. If not, they would long since have been eliminated in the internal wars of their families.

Richard, on the other hand, was excited to see the church, so he called his personal butler to report his plans. Gaton had asked him to inform the family whenever he wanted to leave, and await their arrangements.

The butler made his way to a small room at the side of the castle upon Richard's request, informing a female knight of his plans.

The woman was dressed in light yet elegant armour of an unusual style. Unlike conventional designs that focused on protecting the chest, throat, and groin, her armour seemed to be focused on bringing out her outstanding figure. It fit tightly to all her curves, almost comparable to a custom-made night gown. There was no visible special protection nor defense of her vital parts, while the entire armour was decorated in pretty floral lines and embedded with many gems and crystals.

The veiny patterns were spread all across the breastplate, the jewels shining like stars that seemed almost translucent in certain areas. Apart from the traditionally designed shoulder pads, it seemed as if the entire armour was just for show and wouldn't be effective in combat at all. However, the distinct magic aura radiating from it said otherwise— this surely wasn't any ordinary piece of armour.

The woman was relatively pretty, even a little sultry, with her eyes moving flirtatiously. She looked around 20, her brown bob cut making her appear playful yet experienced. Her whole body was fitted comfortably in the chair, legs resting on the table. Of course, her thighs just had to be exposed. The fair and delicate-looking skin seemed extra-desirable under the golden light of the sun.

She appeared pretty laid back under the purposefully-

strengthened daylight of Faust, like she could fall asleep at any time. The sword that she left leaning against the armrest of the chair was slowing slanting away, seeming like it could fall and collapse on the worn floor any time. The butler knew all this was just a front, and of the men who'd died to the deadly weapon would have agreed if they had the chance.

To the enemies of the Archerons, Blood Paladin Senma was nowhere near adorable.

It took five minutes of the butler's reports for Senma to finally yawm, taking her legs off the table before stretching lazily. This was a rather frustrating process, because the lower half of her armour was styled like a long skirt, exposing the area beneath it here and there. Of course, a woman with both strength and beauty was a man-killer. Many had died under her sword, being impaled within a split second of thinking to peek under her skirt.

But the butler who has been working for the Archerons for 30 years was more than familiar with the 13 rune knights, so he kept his eyes ten centimetres from his feet from the moment he entered the room. They didn't waver a bit.

The 13 knights all had their own pet peeves; Senma loved dressing provocatively, but if one eyed her indecently she would grow furious.

"Our little Richard wants to take a stroll? With Warren?" Senma asked with squinted eyes.

"Yes." The butler replied with respect.

"Alright, got it. Let the boy see the world, it's not good trapping him all day long on this island either. All the sulphur will be bad for his skin! Don't worry, I'll keep him safe. But that's only exclusive to Richard, that half-elven peasant's son could die for all I care."

The butler bowed and left, pretending like he didn't hear

Senma's last words. The Blood Paladin cursed on occasion, another of her habits. However, her promise left him at ease.



# Book 1, Chapter 83 - Conspiracy

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Richard and Warren walked out together from the Teleportation Temple, heading along the shady boulevard to the church at the peak of the mountain. The journey was several kilometres long, but there was enough scenery along the way to make it feel shorter.

Richard had come alone, but Warren brought along four guards each with a striking Archeron emblem on their chest. There was a lot of traffic here, with lavishly armoured rune knights, extravagant carriages and a horde of pedestrians littering the streets. The Church of the Eternal Dragon, being sacred in Faust as it was, had a large mass of followers. That the church could not be rebuilt only strengthened its status in the hearts of its believers. Once they got within a kilometre of the church, even the Alliance's emperor, Bloodthirsty Philip, would get off his carriage and head the rest of the way on foot to show his sincerity towards the Eternal Dragon.

Richard conversed with Warren as they made their way to the church. Having spent more time in the city, the boy knew much more about it than Richard did, and talk of the secrets of the fourteen families and the imperial household would be enough to keep them occupied the entire journey.

Just as they turned a corner, about to take the road leading to the church, a group of people appeared in their path. It was a handful of giggling aristocratic youths, alongside five to six guards. The one that stood out amongst them seemed to be protected and escorted by the rest, dressed in a refined and luxurious outfit that projected his status and deep background. Most importantly, the emblem of the three longswords on his chest indicated that he was a blood descendant of the Joseph Family.

Richard was about as clueless as one could get with regards to the grudges between the Archerons and the Josephs. However,

Warren didn't look so well as he scoffed and took a few big steps, blocking the path of those in front of him.

The teens were initially shocked by the sudden action, before showing signs of annoyance. This was very provocative, causing the guards from the opposing side to roll their sleeves as they stepped forwards, all ready to fight.

Although Warren's own guards were inferior in terms of numbers and strength, they showed no signs of fear. Nonetheless, not being afraid didn't equate to not having a brain, as one of them had already run off to report back to the castle. It seemed like this conflict would be difficult to handle now.

"Seems like your days have been well, Faulk," Warren spat through gritted teeth.

The youth whose name had been called laughed out loud, noticing that Warren was speaking before answering dramatically, "Hey! Isn't this little Master Warren of the Archerons? I indeed am living my life, thank Thor. I earned a good sum at the casino, and even won something that's said to be the family heirloom of an ancient elven tribe! I also heard something very shocking today, are you guys interested to find out?"

The teens surrounding Faulk talked over each other at once, acting like they were eagerly awaiting an oracle from the gods. Warren's expression didn't look good at all, because he was the one who'd lost that heirloom. As for Faulk's shocking news, he had no idea what the boy was babbling about but he was certain that it would be nothing good.

Richard was standing behind Warren, looking at Faulk and his gang with squinted eyes. Countless numbers bounced about before stabilising to clarify many critical statistics. He could speculate the approximate power of the opposing party from the changes in their movements, the method similar to how he would calculate the mana pool of a mage from their aura.

Faulk seemed to be a melee class between level 10 and 12, while his guards were all between level 8 and level 10. As for the remaining teens who were flocking around Faulk, they either had little power or were weak; the strongest amongst them was only around Warren's standard.

Richard quickly patted Warren on the shoulder and said, "Let's go, we still have to make our way to the church."

If they were to make a move in that situation, it would only end up with the two of them beat up. Richard wouldn't be able to go up against six strong guards and Faulk even with his underworld techniques; he wasn't a warrior to begin with. He likely needed a blessing from the Eternal Dragon before he would be able to fight such a large group of melee fighters, what with there being no space to cast magic at such close range even if he had tools to do so instantly— which he didn't.

Additionally, Warren was the one who started this. According to aristocratic custom this would be a pointless fight, likely even making them the joke of the city. Richard didn't like to get beaten up for no reason, and moreover he wasn't all that close to Warren. He would barely be an acquaintance if not for the shared bloodline.

Warren turned and shouted at Richard, "What do you know about this? This fellow is from the Joseph Family! He's the third son of Duke Joseph, and the most annoying one!"

Richard didn't look too well after being yelled at, withdrawing his hand from Warren's shoulder and taking a step back. He'd never been interested in the fights and grudges of the family, and it was obvious that Warren was trying to create a scene here. Faulk's tone implied that the incident between him and Warren had little relation to the hostility between their families, being more of a childish fight between youngsters.

And Richard wasn't fond of being used, even if it by was his own family member.

Just then, Faulk spoke up, “I heard someone went to fool around at the Enchanting Garden after he lost to me. Guess what that slut Nancy told me afterwards? She said that certain someone couldn’t last more than 5 minutes! And his appendage was smaller than that of ground elves, hah!”

The teens surrounding Faulk bursted out in laughter. To them, the bedroom was a battlefield that was sometimes more important than the planar wars. Warren’s face was burning with embarrassment, and he shouted in a twisted voice, “Faulk! Who are you talking about?”

Faulk’s eyes turned icy cold, and he said, “I’m talking about the bastard of a slut. Why, any comments?”

Warren screamed furiously in response, before charging towards Faulk and landing a punch on his face. His movements were quick owing to his training as an archer, so Richard didn’t even have the time to react.

Wham! A low sound resonated from Faulk’s cheekbone where Warren had landed his fist, and the boy’s upper body leaned backwards from the impact. Faulk hadn’t avoided the attack, instead standing his ground and allowing Warren to slam into his face. As a level 10 warrior, he barely budged from the attack. Still, even if strength wasn’t Warren’s forte the punch was strong enough to cause Faulk’s face to swell and paint a purplish bruise on his eye.

Faulk winced as he looked at Warren, and smiled sinisterly, “Bastard! I’ve been waiting for this!”

Fear gripped Richard’s heart as he sensed danger. He saw murderous vibes in Faulk’s eyes! However, it was already too late for him to prepare any sort of magic, and he quickly reached into his pocket but found nothing dagger-like. The dagger Naya had given him for self-defense had long been thrown into the volcano by Gaton.

The situation he dreaded finally played out, as Faulk pointed an accusing finger at Warren and exclaimed, “Kill these Archeron motherfuckers!”

The six guards of the Joseph Family charged forward and enveloped them. The several teens that were following Faulk also followed; although their individual strengths were mediocre they still had an advantage in numbers that was quite effective in gang fights like this one.

As for his part, Faulk remained where he was for a while before he stretched his hands and walked forward.

# Book 1, Chapter 84 - Sacrifice

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Three of the Archeron guards were immediately sent flying. Each around level 5 or 6, they qualified to be adventurers in the mainland, but in front of the Joseph Family's guards who were level 8 to even level 10, they couldn't even stall for time. In the meanwhile, Warren acted crazy as he charged everywhere wildly, smashing everything. By the looks of it, those young nobles and the Joseph Family's guards did not dare get too rough. This actually meant Warren could hold on for a while, though he did have to endure quite a few kicks and punches.

The sense of danger grew increasingly evident to Richard. However, everything had happened far too suddenly. Even as he tried to retreat a guard darted out and sent a flying kick towards his ribs. This attack was powerful, obviously infused with a lot of energy, and was definitely capable of breaking a normal mage's ribs!

A hint of fury flashed in Richard's eyes, which quickly turned icy-cold. He silently took a step backwards, dodging the kick before he grabbed the guard's boot and applied force. The guard's ankles creaked, completely deforming. However, at that very moment the whistling wind sounded from behind Richard!

In a small forest not too far away, Senma was sitting lazily on a tree, her upper body leaning on the trunk as she dozed off. However, her dazed eyes suddenly opened, her charming face immediately filling up with dense bloodlust. She raised her slender blade with a cold hum, jumping off the tree in the direction of the battle.

However, the Blood Paladin came to a stop after but a single step, as if spacetime itself had been frozen in this place. A wizened man appeared out of nowhere at the tree trunk behind her, decked up entirely in a dark grey. Even behind his hood, his hair was the colour of dry grass, with a few strands sticking out messily from

the sides. While his features could not be seen clearly from the shadows of the hood, those sinister eyes were exceptionally bright. There was a large bulge at the front of the cloak, with some sort of weapon pointing at the middle of Senma's back.

Senma remained completely immobile and slowly twisted her head, stating in a voice as cold as ice, "Poison Snake!"

The man let out a hoarse and unsettling chuckle, "Senma, my dearest, this is the third time we've met. We're familiar with each other by this point, so I'll cut the bullshit. You better give up on rushing over to save them. If you try to hurry this, you'll immediately face a serious injury. You might even lose your own life here, without saving anyone! That's why the most intelligent thing for you to do now is to slowly, I repeat slowly turn around. Don't do anything funny, or this lousy crossbow worth a few thousand gold coins is going to open a hole in your adorable tiny waist. Do you want to use that pretty and impractical armour you have and test out its strength? I'm actually very keen on shooting it at your buttocks, but that will have to wait until I'm done with the first arrow."

Senma didn't take another step forward. As expected she began to turn, slowly but surely. However, she was not infuriated by Poison Snake's provoking words and exclaimed icily, "Poison Snake, I know fully well how capable you are. Once I turn around, it won't be so easy for you to escape. Don't assume that I don't have the guts to kill anyone in Faust!"

Poison Snake licked his lips and let out a giggle, "There's actually no need for us to make such a ruckus, no? Young master Faulk finally grabbed this chance to discipline your family's Warren, who doesn't know any better. Actually, Warren doesn't have any status in the Archeron Family, so why get so serious? Besides, the most you can do is seriously injure me, but you can't kill me. I'm confident that I can run to the church, and I'm sure you won't have the guts to kill someone in front of the church's guards. If you

really want to attack me then, the famed Blood Paladin will be accompanying me in death, so that's still a profit."

Senma's expression became increasingly cold as she answered, "No matter how useless Warren is, he is still one of the Archerons. It's not up to you to dishonour him. I'm giving you one last chance. If you don't disappear in three seconds, this world will no longer have a Poison Snake."

"Is this a real threat, or are you just talking big? Let me help you count down!"

Poison Snake obviously thought nothing of Senma's threats, leaving the situation at a standstill. Meanwhile, the results of the fight at the street corner had grown clear. As expected, the Joseph Family's superior numbers and strength had won out.

The four Archeron guards were all on the floor, unable to get up. Even the one who'd run away to send word had been intercepted. The young nobles had surrounded them, kicking them mercilessly every once in a while as they called them names. On the other side, Warren had also been kicked to the ground and was being pressed to the ground by a guard. However, nobody dared kick him.

In the world of aristocracy, punches and kicks were just part of a fight. However, if one of the parties had lost the ability to fight back but the other still continued to attack, that was instead humiliation. These young nobles came from Faust itself, not any of the islands, and were mere vassals of the Joseph Family at best. Warren and Faulk were of similar status; if they dared cross the line, although the former might not be able to take down the latter he would still be able to take care of them. Their families definitely wouldn't come in his way. Although it was an old adage to look at a dog's owner before beating it, smart dogs had to learn not to attack everything in sight.

Richard was laid down on the ground as well, but the difference was that there were two guards holding him down. Two more



from the Joseph Family were on the ground next to him, one cradling his right foot that had bent at an unnatural angle while the other was hugging his kneecap, pale from the pain.

Of the two, Richard had broken the ankle of the first when he'd thrown a flying kick his way. The second had tried to knee him, in reply to which he'd smashed the man's kneecap with a piece of ore he carried on him at all times. Richard had actually gained the upper hand after using Eruption, and his underworld skills allowed him to precisely target key weaknesses in his opponents' defense. However, when it came down to it, he was a mage and not a high-levelled warrior, which was why he had not been able to dodge the surprise attack from behind him. A third guard had mercilessly pounded the back of his head, and he had fallen down and was pressed to the ground.

Richard was now suffering badly, and the immense pain was making things go dark in front of his eyes. If not for the impressive physique he'd acquired at the Deepblue, that one full-strength punch alone would have been enough to knock him unconscious. The damage to his critical faculties could cause lasting damage that would affect his future as a mage, an injury that could only be healed by powerful clerics. Besides the head, Richard's arms and body were filled with an acute pain, and his shoulder was hurting so much that it seemed on the verge of separating from his body. His face was pressed to the ice-cold stone ground, and the only view he had of what was going on came from his right eye.

Great shock and humiliation flooded Richard's mind. All of the blood rose to his head, and he was on the verge of boiling from it. Mere *guards* were holding him down in such a humiliating pose, and they were gutsy enough to not lighten their attacks! For every second that he was held down, Richard felt like he'd been given another slap in public.

Everything had happened very quickly. Less than two minutes had passed from the beginning of the conflict to the current

situation. Richard lost his calm, releasing an animalistic howl. Using all his strength, his upper body actually began to move up!

One of the guards holding him down was sent flying, as he had been caught unprepared. The other had rather quick reflexes, and used another arm to hold onto Richard's waist. However, the great power Richard had burst forth with caused him to sway, and it seemed like he would release his grasp.

The guard who'd been holding Warren down immediately used his strength and charged over, throwing a precise kick at Richard's back that caused him to crash down again, smashing head first into the stone floor. Blood immediately flowed from his forehead.

There was now a fair number of people watching by the road at this point, but after seeing the family emblem of the Josephs and Archerons, nobody dared come closer. Seeing the blood flowing from Richard, many exclaimed in shock. Richard was obviously wearing the colours of nobility; he was no guard!

Faulk only seemed to notice Richard now, walking over, "Who's this kid? Why haven't I seen him before?"

Richard somehow lifted his head, but just as he wanted to speak, Faulk used his foot and stepped on his head, forcing his face back to the ground!

# Book 1, Chapter 85 - Sacrifice

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“This kid has a pretty bad temper, to dare to be obstinate even at this stage!” Faulk smiled with his foot on Richard’s head, speaking to the group of young nobles.

However, this time he did not get a warm response. All of the young nobles turned pale and looked at him, at a loss. They were more aware of what was going on than regular bystanders. Not only did they recognise the colour of Richard’s clothing that showed he was a noble, but also with the quality and style, Richard perhaps was even of greater status than Warren!

They just could not understand how a trivial little fight that would at most result in just some bruises and slight cuts could develop to this extent. Seeing the huge pool of blood from the nameless young noble’s head under Faulk’s foot, as well as the area on his shoulder and back where he’d been seriously injured, and the clothing had completely split open, they knew that the situation had gotten very serious, and it was impossible to save it now. With their tiny backgrounds, it was impossible for them to take on the fury of the Archerons. At the thought of Gaton’s bloody methods when entering Faust, these young nobles who had never entered the battlefield and seen little could not hide the chill that rose in their hearts.

Meanwhile, in the small forest, Senma produced an astounding vigour. She stopped midway her turn, halting at a position that was at an acute angle of 30 degrees from meeting Poison Snake’s gaze head on. Like a cheetah, her body was crouched down low, her alluring body suddenly accumulating an explosive strength.

Poison Snake was now obviously nervous, and Senma must have sensed something, which was why she had begun moving despite the risk. In front of a powerful and terrifying aura like this, he was now completely certain that he couldn’t stop her with just the crossbow.

If this arrow could not delay her ability to move and allowed her to charge to the scene at the corner of the street, even at the brink of death the Blood Paladin could kill all of the Josephs there in seconds!

Just as Poison Snake was planning on throwing caution to the wind and pressing the trigger of the crossbow, Senma suddenly stopped moving and slowly stood up straight, and then gazed at Poison Snake with the gaze of one looking at a dead person. With mockery in her tone, she said, “You all did well with this, even I’m impressed! It’s a pity that the only thing you lack is luck. Next time, before scheming anything, it’s best to pray at the Church of the Eternal Dragon! For now, you need to consider how you’re going to escape.”

Practically at the same time, Poison Snake sensed two powerful auras ascending from the distance, and his expression instantly changed!

At this very moment, Faulk had a twisted smile on his face, and all the energy in his body blazed with explosive might as he viciously stepped down on Richard’s head. This amount of energy could easily shatter Richard’s skull under his foot!

This was Faulk’s true motive!

Faulk believed that with all the pretense beforehand, this sudden attack could easily make it difficult for the hidden experts hidden in the crowd to react in time. By the time they charged to the front, Richard would have received a fatal blow!

There was no doubt that Richard had experts around to protect him. However, because of the rules of the nobles, fights and duels between the younger generation were not to be interfered with by the family’s experts. Conflicts between those of similar strength had to be resolved amongst themselves. This was a hypocritical principle of fairness, but also training for the younger generation. This was respect towards individual strength, while also

preventing large families from being called in for such trivial matters.

However, there were always bottom lines in all matters, and that was life.

As one of those in line for the Joseph Family's inheritance in the future, nobody would have thought Faulk could be so crazy.

Only Faulk himself knew that, being a true son of Duke Joseph as well as a talented warrior, he was fated to be the family's sacrifice. If it didn't happen this time, it would in the future. His fate was determined by his mother's low status, and his own gifts weren't great enough to turn the tides. Instead, the talent that he seemed to have only served to fix his fate all the more.

Before one entered the core ranks of their families, the value of a noble's child was determined by their blood relations. Thus, Warren and Faulk were essentially equivalent in status, while Richard was the same as well. After killing Richard, Faulk would not be spared.

At worst, Faulk would be killed at the spot by the Archerons there, but the best case scenario was that he successfully returned to the family and then died with honour. This would make it up to the Archeron Family, as well as to the imperial family of the Sacred Alliance and the aristocrats of Faust.

Marquis Gaton would lose a son, but so would Duke Joseph. This was quite a fair result, at least on the outside.

However, from another perspective, the Joseph Family had merely lost a warrior who might not even enter the ranks of sainthood, while the Archerons had lost a future runemaster. The loss could not be equated at all. To be blunt, even a hundred Faulks could not match up to a single finger of Richard's.

The reason the Joseph Family had chosen to do this now was because of these considerations. Richard had yet to establish

himself in the family, and no matter how great his potential and talent was, for now he was only a son of Marquis Gaton. If he was given more time, becoming the official family runemaster or given a title, the life of even a small nameless knight could not be exchanged with that of a duke's son. When that happened, what they needed to hand over was, at the very least, a child of the family. This was political fairness.

However, the limited loss to the Joseph Family was everything in his life to Faulk! That was why, when he stomped down with all his strength, he was chuckling almost maniacally!

However, at this moment, Faulk suddenly found things going dark before his eyes, to the point that he could practically see nothing. A large, dark sword suddenly appeared in the air, taking up his entire field of vision. An invisible pressure covered Faulk's body, leaving him suffocated.

'Am I dying?' The thought flashed through his mind like lightning, and he closed his eyes in despair while stomping with his right foot down more forcefully. If he could bring along a future runemaster with him in death, then it would be worth it.

Just as the large sword was about to pierce into his chest, another ordinary longsword came flying over and knocked it aside! Just as Faulk heaved a sigh of relief, he suddenly found his body stiffening, and he was rendered immobile with his right foot unable to move at all. He shouted from the depths of his heart, burning all the energy he could in an attempt to struggle free, but this force was far too powerful, to the point that he could not fight back at all. Just a little more, and he would be able to destroy Richard's head. However, this little distance was as far as a large moat.

Faulk despaired at the knowledge that his body was rising constantly, but he still did his best to kick with his right leg, attempting to deal Richard the fatal blow. Just a little more, and he would gain the sufficient price for his life.

A well-built, burly man appeared in front of Faulk, unbeknownst to even the onlookers. The middle-aged man had a spiny beard, and his short hair made him appear exceptionally sinister and formidable. His boorish and uncouth aura gave the surrounding young nobles the misconception that the being in front of them was not a person, but an ancient beast.

The burly man had one hand gripping Faulk's neck, and the other holding an ordinary longsword. The corners of his mouth were drawn back, and he let loose a laugh that seemed to come from hell itself. A young, beautiful woman appeared behind him, with short crimson hair and an obvious scar on the right side of her face. It matched with the chilling, sombre aura she gave off, as well as the large, dark sword with hints of bloody light on it that automatically stopped any impractical fantasies any men had of her.

# Book 1, Chapter 86 - Conclusion

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The burly man's laughter alone shook the earth so intensely that the young nobles and the Joseph guards lost balance, collapsing one after the other.

A sinister look flashed on the man's face, as he brandished the longsword in his right hand to slash unbelievably smoothly at Faulk's knee. The boy's right leg was cut off, just like that.

The only thing Faulk noticed at first was a peculiar hollow feeling coming from his knee, but that was followed by an overwhelming pain that immediately drowned out his consciousness. He screamed out in pain, blood spurting out from his knee like a waterfall. Richard, who was still below him, was drenched.

The burly man turned his head to look at the powerful and unrestrained woman, "You don't need to dirty your hands for a small matter like this, Alice. I'll handle the trouble from here; you just conquered a big territory, and are still fatigued."

Indeed, this beautiful red-haired young lady in her twenties was the person deemed to be a god of war amongst the younger Archerons. Alice Archeron, the youngest ever to become an earl through merit and not inheritance.

Alice shrugged her shoulders, "If I knew you were coming, I wouldn't have made any move."

The burly man laughed, "I simply happened to be passing by. How should I put this... Is it that this bunch of Joseph lads is too unlucky, or is our boy extremely fortunate?"

At the moment, a few of the guards from the Joseph Family who could still manage to move about saw that Faulk's right leg had been chopped off. Their eyes turned red in agitation, as they frantically shot up from the ground and rushed towards the



Archerons. With Faulk injured as he was, they would either be sentenced to a life of labour upon their return to the clan, or worse still, directly executed!

The longsword held in the middle-aged man's hand flashed a few times. Two charging guards immediately lost control of their bodies, falling to the floor. Just as their bodies touched the ground, their arms came off at the elbow and their legs at the knee. The cuts were flawless each time, and both guards hissed out in pain as they rolled about on the ground, blood flowing everywhere.

The third one took a step forward, but upon being freed Richard suddenly shot up and punched the side of his rib. He then stepped on the man's ankle.

This guard was a level 8 warrior with a powerful body, but the sound of bones cracking rang out from his ankle. The blow to his rib was powerful as well, almost causing him to black out. However, he was an experienced fighter. He didn't dodge the abrupt attack, instead elbowing back almost upon reflex.

Richard took a deep breath. He chose not to dodge the elbow, instead letting it hit his own abdomen. However, even with this strike the guard couldn't budge an inch from his position. It was then that Richard started a barrage of punches with both fists on the man's rib, his strength boosted by Eruption.

Thump! Thump! THUMP! Heavy and dull thuds echoed one after the other, each attack packing as much power as the last. The guard was trapped in desperate straits, held in place at his injured leg and forced to take the onslaught of punches. He couldn't even change his posture; the slightest of shifts would expose a larger weakness to the boy, which would subject his vitals to Richard's attack. Thus, he could only direct his elbow with all his might towards Richard, in attempt to pit his strength against Richard's to free himself.

Richard did not dodge at all. There was a trace of insanity on his

calm and composed face as fists of steel smashed into the guard's rib again and again and again with a steady pace and strength. It was as if he wasn't being attacked at all, even if the blood frothing at his mouth proved that he definitely wasn't having an easy time dealing with the death throes of this warrior.

The guard's rib eventually caved in. He yelled out a final scream of despair, spitting out a mouthful of blood with bits and pieces of flesh within before he collapsed.

Richard only raised his foot from the guard's ankle after the man completely collapsed. Once that was done, he couldn't help spraying out a mouthful of misty blood himself. He watched the severely injured guard, hesitating for a while, but eventually chose not to make any more moves. He instead raised his head, fixing a wolf's gaze onto Faulk.

He was silent for half a second, before his body glowed with a faint blue radiance. He stepped forward, advancing abruptly as if he was being pushed by an invisible hand behind him. He aimed his hand forward like it was a sword, transforming into a streak of blue lightning that rushed towards Faulk. If one looked closely enough, they would notice that the pale blue light had formed a sword in Richard's hand!

Silvermoon's fourth secret sword, Annihilation! It was the only one Richard could execute right now, but although Faulk's body possessed the tenacity of a level 10 warrior he would still seriously get injured by this dagger formed purely from the moonforce of the fourth moon. Had he been in possession of a real sword right now, even a powerful cleric would have to spend a great deal of effort to heal the damage he would leave behind.

The burly man stuck his long sword into the ground, before holding out a big palm in Richard's way. The attack crashed into his palm, but for a moment it was Richard that felt like he'd knocked into a mountain at full speed. The violent collision caused his insides to churn, with an indescribably uncomfortable

stuffiness in his chest. The moonforce of the pale blue moon that Richard had taken tremendous effort to gather dissipated all at once, and he stumbled back several steps before managing to steady himself.

“Oi, Gaton’s son, the same goes for you too! Don’t dirty your own hands for this, it’s such a trivial matter,” The burly man shook his head, “Gaton is indeed making me jealous, though. He actually got himself a son like you without saying anything about it! Young lad, you’ve got to call me your uncle. Just wait till I’m done dealing with this, then we’ll test how much you can drink!”

Someone from the gathered crowd suddenly exclaimed, “It’s Goliath, Earl Goliath!” The name instantly caused a small commotion.

At the same moment, in the biggest room at the top floor of a club building thousands of metres away, Raymond was sitting in front of the window with his brows knitted in deep thought. He was holding a silver monocular in his hand, observing the incident taking place at the faraway street corner. The monocular seemed splendidly made, its design ancient.

Raymond suddenly exclaimed, “It’s Alice! Why is she here too, and at this timing!”

Upon hearing Alice’s name, a few faces in the room paled slightly. Naseby stood up and spoke in a low voice, “I’ll go deal with her!”

Just as Naseby took large strides towards the window, about to jump out, Raymond abruptly extended his left hand to block his way. That long, fair, and delicate hand that resembled a woman’s barely responded to the collision at all, with only the fingertips trembling slightly.

While Naseby was feeling baffled by Raymond’s act, Raymond had already placed his monocular down. He let out a sigh, “You don’t have to head over anymore. Goliath is there as well, and we

certainly don't have anyone right now who can stand in that fellow's way. Faulk is finished."

While both of the Archerons mentioned were earls, Alice was known for her wit and cunning on the battlefield. Although her might was nothing to be scoffed at, with her being at level 17 Naseby who was a level 18 warrior could suppress her. However, Goliath Archeron was of an entirely different standard. He'd long reached level 20 in terms of individual combat power, and he had the capacity to wipe out everyone in this room.

This half-brother of Gaton's, named after the ancient giant, had long shown his physical prowess. His level didn't represent his actual combat power. Although he wasn't ready to take on legendary opponents yet, he could easily take on two saint warriors. His one shortcoming was his mediocre leadership and governance, which left him unable to advance from the earlship he was born with.

During wars across the Sacred Alliance, across human history, and even in the planar wars, Alice's threat was undoubtedly far beyond that of Goliath. However, in the current situation Goliath alone was enough to foil all of Raymond's plans.

At this moment, Kevin suddenly remembered something. His face paled, and he said, "There's still Poison Snake!"

However, the old man Valen shook his head, "Poison Snake is most likely done for as well. However, that's something we only lost a bit of money on at most. Faulk, on the other hand..."

The people in the room all fell silent. Other than Raymond and a few others, the rest who were present only realized Faulk's purpose in the plan after witnessing the event taking place in front of their eyes. As it turned out, Faulk, who was gifted, diligent and well-liked by Duke Joseph, had been prepared to be sacrificed from the start. After all, Faulk was Duke Joseph's biological son.

# Book 1, Chapter 87 - Conclusion

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The street corner was filled with a river of blood. The guards' limbs had all been chopped off, while the young nobles who'd participated had all given up an arm for their transgressions. Faulk was still held in Goliath's left hand, looking very pale due to the blood loss. He was too weak to even cry out now, only moaning and groaning on occasion.

Earl Goliath looked at Faulk with interest like a brown bear that had seen fish in winter, lifting the boy up further and turning him around, "So, child of the Josephs, you're just a discarded item. How unexpected, I didn't think that old fellow would use his own son like this! Don't worry I won't kill you; that'd be too troublesome for me. But you... you won't be useful as a pawn anymore..."

His hand shook vigorously as he spoke, jolting Faulk around like a cloth puppet. The sound of bones cracking sounded unceasingly from within his body, and his pale face was suddenly suffused with colour before his eyes rolled back and he fainted.

The bystanders all turned pale, but none made a sound. Goliath had inflicted serious damage to Faulk's internal organs, eliminating all his energy. From hereon, Faulk would no longer be able to train as a warrior. He would live the rest of his life out as a sickly, weak fellow.

Senma hummed coldly within the forest, and a light swing of the slender sword in her hands let loose a string of blood pearls that drew an elegant symbol on the ground. Ten metres away, Poison Snake was leaning against a huge tree, one hand on his chest while the other pointed at the Blood Paladin, his face full of shock. Blood flowed from between his fingers despite his hand pressing down on the wound, dyeing most of his front robes red. He wanted to speak, but the moment he opened his mouth all that surged out was a bloody froth.

Senma took two steps forward, picking up the intricate navy blue crossbow from the ground. She took a look at it, “So it’s a refined gold crossbow. Let’s see what’s carved on it... Tsk, tsk! It’s actually the renowned Poison Needle! You really did spend a lot on this, no wonder it felt so threatening! I’ll be taking this, you won’t need it anyway down in hell. Thanks!”

Poison Snake reached out as he watched Senma’s figure disappear into the distance, as if trying to grab her. But he was overwhelmed by a sudden sense of weakness, and slowly slid to the ground.

Senma walked to the fringe of the forest, frowning as she looked at a navy blue arrow embedded in her abdomen, with only a bit of the tail feather showing. She didn’t fiddle with it, instead gritting her teeth and walking onto the street. Only upon seeing Richard stand up using his own strength did she heave a sigh of relief. The colour on her face suddenly disappeared, and the imposing aura she had before disappeared just like that. One could even see a trace of delicacy in her expression.

By this point, Warren had gotten up and stood beside Richard himself, deathly pale as he stared at the blood, dismembered limbs, and people moaning miserably on the ground.

By this point, Goliath had already tossed Faulk nonchalantly to the Joseph Family servants who were tossing and turning, looking at Senma with a smile, “You’re still as pretty as ever! Your tastes seem to have changed, though. Why do you like sticking something in that pretty waist of yours? If you don’t hurry back and get it treated, you’ll have to lie in the Church of the Eternal Dragon for a few days! Of course, Gaton will be paying for the treatment from the church, so that has nothing to do with me. It wouldn’t be bad to see him suffer a little for once!”

Senma took a deep breath, expression frozen as she strode towards Richard and lifted him up in one go. She then bowed slightly to Goliath and Alice, saying, “Then I’ll be on my way.”

“Go. I’ll deal with those old guys from the assembly,” Goliath waved his large hands casually.

Senma did not linger, leaving for the teleportation temple with Richard in tow. Once she turned the corner, she would enter the sights of the guards of the temple. If anyone dared attack them then, they would be attacked by the guards.

“Hey, bring me along too!” Warren cried out. However, Senma did not bother with him as she disappeared into the temple with Richard.

Warren cried out a few times, but it was to no avail. He could only stop, a malicious and poisonous look on his face. While he was Gaton’s son, he did not hold a high position in the family. It was impossible to compare him with the thirteen knights that had followed Gaton through life and death. While Gaton had many children, nobody had had any special treatment before Richard’s appearance. It appeared that Warren’s own privileges were even lesser.

Glaring at Senma’s back, Warren muttered hatefully under his breath, “Damn it, isn’t she just a whore? Does everyone look down on me just because my mother is a commoner? Someday in the future, I’ll fuck you to death!”

The moment he finished speaking, Warren was startled to find there were two powerful beings behind him. Terrified, he quickly stole a glance and found Goliah and Alice speaking amongst themselves. It seemed like they had not heard what he’d said, something that let him feel relieved.

Goliath’s eyes narrowed slightly as he gazed at a building on a hill in the distance, “There are a few mice over there. Even with the distance, I can smell their stench! Raymond Joseph should be there as well. While I can’t sense his aura, the others should be his underlings. I’ve heard that kid’s status in the family has been rising quickly lately, and I think this issue probably has some

relation to him.”

Alice snickered and then said, “Not probably. This was orchestrated by him. I’ll head over to have a chat with him now!”

“Alright. I’m not very proficient in this area, so I’m counting on you. If I were to go, I’d probably kill a few people,” Goliath answered.

“Leave it to me. However, you have to help me with that problem!” Alice exclaimed straightforwardly.

“Deal! I’ve got a good impression of Richard, but I’m not sure if he’ll be able to convince Gaton. He can only try his best.” Goliath’s smile widened as he laughed.

Clop! Clop! The sound of hooves rang out like thunder at the end of the boulevard. A team of knights dressed in golden armour and red caps, the splendid attire of the imperial guards, turned around the corner and quickly charged to the end of the street. The leading knight saw the pool of limbs and blood, paying attention to the emblems of the Josephs and Archerons, and the corner of his eye involuntarily twitched. He immediately jumped off his warhorse, walking up to Goliath and speaking with a bow, “I am Dean, leader of the imperial patrol. May I know how to address you, and what exactly happened here?”

Goliath hugged his arms, “I’m Earl Goliath Archeron, lord of the Westway Province. As for what happened, there’s a fair number of people here who saw the entire thing from start to end. I am willing to accompany you to the assembly and explain everything.”

Dean’s pupils shrank the moment he heard Goliath’s name, and he began to act even more respectfully. He turned around immediately, having the knights under him invite some clerics and priests over. Nobody except a few servants had really died, but if they continued to dither a life would be lost. And that might be considered his fault. While he was doing all this, Goliath stood calm and motionless like a mountain.



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Raymond had already stowed away the precious monocular, but he didn't leave. He instead seemed to be waiting for something.

Three knocks sounded from the door to the room, following which the door was opened without approval. Alice Archeron walked in, stabbing her large sword into the ground before she pulled a chair up and sat before Raymond.

Raymond stood up and bowed towards Alice, speaking with a smile, "It's my honour to meet the Archerons' beautiful goddess of war!"

Alice was completely unmoved by this and said dully, "Sorry, but I don't plan on being courteous to true enemies. However, I do have to admit that this scheme of yours was truly unexpected, and you almost succeeded."

Raymond took a seat and calmly smiled, "Almost doesn't mean success. However, my only loss this time was in the field of luck."

# Book 1, Chapter 88 - Punishment

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Alice nodded in approval, “Luck is a very important part of one’s power. Offer some more sacrifices to the Eternal Dragon. Also, don’t think that sending Amilon and Sheff packing means you’ll be able to deal with the other Archerons. Those two pieces of trash are a disgrace. Honestly, I’m quite regretful that our territories are three thousand kilometres apart.”

Raymond laughed, “I find it regretful too! If our territories were to be joined together, that might have been enough to form a marquisate. However, the true wars are fought on the endless planes. I anticipate the day when I come to know the coordinates of yours.”

Alice smiled, “I anticipate the same thing. However, I’m afraid what happened today can’t be resolved so easily. You’ve already infuriated Gaton, and even I’m a little afraid of that guy. Take care of that little barony of yours!”

Having said this, Alice stood up and headed outside the room. She suddenly turned around at the doorway, scanning everyone in the room and saying indifferently, “If I were you, I’d definitely return home more often in the near future to see if anything’s happened.”

In that moment, the expressions of practically everyone but Raymond and Valen changed. They all understood the threat behind Alice’s words: the incident with Faulk was a terrible opening. The fight between their families would no longer abide by the age-old traditions of nobility, and the Archerons would begin to use underhanded means as well...

A long while after Alice left, Raymond sobered up from his thoughts.

The atmosphere in the room was stifling, and everyone looked terrible. The Joseph Family had a long history, and as experts who

depended on the Josephs each and every one of the people here was a small noble with their own land. Valen and Naseby themselves were barons, the titles inheritable, which was why Alice's threat was straightforward and effective.

The results of Faulk's failure was obvious. The big shots of the major families were no fools, and they would see through the conspiracy behind this matter. Later this very same day the news would spread out, and would include some details outside the actual scene as well. Time had been tight, and they would not be able to erase all traces.

Now they would have to expect the Archerons' revenge. Faulk being injured and crippled was a part of the price, but that was not enough. The only reason he wasn't killed was that Goliath wanted to avoid any issues that would bring, and also to leave some room for them to exact a more proper revenge. Or perhaps they would use this as a pretext, making a big fuss about it. They would follow the culture of revenge amongst nobility: an eye for an eye, blood for blood, and plunder until the price had been paid.

However, things were different if the Archerons targeted these minor nobles. Although they were part of the Joseph Family's core strength, they were not a part of it by blood. Outside of Valen and Naseby, the rest of their families hadn't accompanied them for generations, so Duke Joseph would likely be willing to let them go.

Poison Snake, for instance, was only an expert temporarily hired by them. Even as he was dying probably thought that the fight was just a battle between two hedonistic children of large families, with no idea of what was truly going on. Even if he died the Joseph Family could just hand over some compensation in the form of gold. In the eyes of families with great backgrounds like them, gold was one of the least valuable things.

Their values to the Josephs followed a similar logic. Although they could be considered experts individually, experts were the thing the Archerons lacked the least. If the Archerons went all out

on them, nobody in their midst would be able to escape. The Josephs did have people able to contend against Goliath, and even Gaton or Mordred, but the issue was that they would not send out these people just for a few trivial characters like them.

Even if this situation was on a bigger scale and applied to the family, things would still be the same. Now, just Gaton alone could contend against the entire Joseph Family. If all the Archerons were seen as a single entity, then in terms of individual strength, they had an absolutely crushing advantage over the Josephs.

Thankfully, this bunch of lunatics had never truly worked together, and some even betrayed and sold each other out. An example would be what had just transpired. However, the temporary alliance between Gaton, Goliath, and Alice was already enough to cause Duke Joseph a headache. It would be a simple task to deal with those people who were attached to the family.

Thus, all eyes landed on Raymond in that moment. If the Joseph Family was willing to protect them, then the Archerons would target the direct descendants of Joseph. However, this matter...

Raymond gazed at these subordinates that had followed him for many years, and gently said, "With Alice's personality, that was definitely not an empty threat. Hence, if the family is to protect you, then there is a large possibility of war with the Archerons."

Everyone's expressions turned even worse. But then Raymond smiled with confidence, "However, I have no habit of abandoning my comrades. I anticipate exchanging blows with Alice, and even Gaton, on the battlefield."

Everyone, including Valen, heaved a sigh of relief. Joy and gratitude surged in their hearts.

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Meanwhile, Richard had returned to the Archeron island, and Senma disappeared immediately after handing him to the butler.

The arrow from Poison Snake was actually extremely dangerous, with astounding power that allowed it to penetrate both her magical armour and skin, reaching deep into her internal organs. The poison and indistinguishable curses attached to it were already eating away at her strength, and only by relying on an unknown tenacity had she managed to bring the boy home.

The butler was shocked upon seeing Richard's state. The boy's forehead, the back of his skull, and many other vulnerable areas were all bruised black and blue, with blood still seeping out of some parts. His clothes were completely ripped apart at the chest, abdomen, and back, obviously not from tearing but from powerful attacks to his body. It was easy to imagine the harm that must have been done to him.

When a powerful cleric from the family was rushed over, he wrinkled his forehead upon seeing the state of Richard's injuries. He proposed that the areas with lighter injuries were handled externally, lessening the strain on the divine spell and allowing him to expend some effort after casting it to check if there were any other repercussions.

Soon enough, Richard returned to his own room. The butler believed Richard, who had gone through shock, needed to get a good rest. Richard did appear tired as well, though that was because he had used Eruption twice in succession. His injuries had mostly healed, and the areas where the skin had broken had ointment applied on them. His internal organs had obviously been shaken up, but after a few days he would completely recover.

The cleric had spent the most time on his head. He hadn't actually felt uncomfortable at the start, but after being fiddled with for so long, he had begun to feel slightly dizzy.

# Book 1, Chapter 89 - Punishment

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Richard now sat alone by his bedside, his hands cradling his forehead. The events which had just transpired replayed in his mind scene by scene, every instant incomparably clear.

Things had just happened far too suddenly. He had only felt a distinct sense of danger at the beginning, which was why he'd grown furious when those guards attacked him. He had chosen to retaliate with full strength, mercilessly crippling two of them, but he'd fallen with that attack from the third. This was a result that Richard had anticipated already, he was not arrogant enough to think that he could win against the joint attack of three warriors above level 8. That he was able to take two of them down with him was already an unexpected result.

While this was only his first time experiencing a situation like this, Richard knew that it concerned the reputation of the Archerons. Tiny issues like it weren't common in Faust, but they weren't exactly rare either. Every family that successfully entered and established itself in Faust normally had some form of animosity with the older and more powerful families already present there. Thus, Richard was prepared for humiliation. Faulk stepping on his head was one form of such, although it was an extreme kind that would create a blood feud. However, in the next moment everything had changed.

When he thought back to it, the force coming from Faulk's foot had been great enough to crush his head, smashing his skull into pieces like porcelain! In that moment, a true shadow of death had shrouded all of his senses. Faulk had wanted to kill him! This wasn't a heated decision, but instead premeditated murder!

Richard had never felt such a close shave with death before. That one attack from Blood Parrot had been fast and silent, not giving him even a chance to feel afraid. This time, things had been different. The terrifying pressure from that shoe, and the creaking

of his skull under the force... It replayed itself clearly in his mind, time and time again.

His ice-cold hands were trembling without end, and he felt so weak he could lose his consciousness in the next moment, sinking into boundless darkness. He felt bursts of pain from his fingers, a result of clobbering a level 8 warrior with his fists using no technique. His joints were still swollen up, and he was sweating from the pain.

However, Richard was thankful for the pain. It was what allowed him to remain sober. The great amount of sweat soaking his clothing made it stick tight to his skin, but the discomfort only kept him clear.

If not for Alice and Goliath appearing suddenly, if that foot had stomped all the way down... Richard couldn't stop himself from thinking of that over and over again. He wanted to control himself, but could not suppress the terror in his heart. Once the fury and humiliation had vanished, all that was left was a fear of death. It was a huge terror that Richard had never even imagined before!

He looked up, forcing himself to see everything in the room, observing it attentively to expel the fear. Precision had grown erratic, however, with countless numbers appearing in his vision. Try as he might, he couldn't make any sense of them, as if his mind had been sealed in ice. It was only when that strange blade appeared in his vision that Richard's heart leapt slightly.

His residence wasn't large, only containing a hall and two rooms. The bedroom was about ten or so metres long, so the blade that was a metre and a half long took up quite a large amount of space already. Without a scabbard, it was wrapped up crudely in beast skin and placed horizontally on the writing desk by his window. A corner of the skin had opened up, revealing a bit of the sharp blade within.

Richard's heart thumped. As if enchanted, he jumped out of bed

and slowly headed to the writing desk, grabbing the shaft and removing the beast skin that was wrapped around the blade. He then closed his eyes, breathing slow and deep.

This was an ancient longsword, shaped to support stabs. The threads at the shaft were showing wear and tear, but it felt extremely comfortable to hold. In just a breath's time Richard's mind spread through the handle and to the blade, his silvermoon blood beginning to flow as it absorbed the moonforce from the sky and poured it into the blade. It gave the blade some colour that fluctuated with the moonforce, changing irregularly with the colours of the moons.

It was only then that Richard's mind began to steady itself, the blade in his hand making him feel like he had some power to depend on. He still couldn't help recalling the scene near the church, but things were different now. He was now simulating the course of events had he had this longsword in hand during the fight.

The sword would have allowed him to draw enough power from the moons at the first inkling of danger, and with the added power from Eruption his battle might would have increased threefold! He would be able to kill most of the guards and young nobles on the scene by the time it took a feather to drop, and the destructive power of the ashen indigo moon would leave Faulk seriously injured.

Only when he was truly near death, coming into contact with the reaper's scythe, did Richard truly understand terror and the importance of power. If nobody had been able to stop Faulk, who cared whether the Archeron Family would pursue the matter and the Joseph Family would have no choice but to execute Faulk? He would already be dead, and the dead couldn't fulfill any wishes or dreams.

His thoughts finally calmed down, and everything before his eyes returned to normal. Richard let loose a long sigh and slowly placed



the sword down. He then took a seat by the window, beginning to think over his experience that day. Numerous suspicious events began to link together one by one, and he had the jarring feeling that something was wrong. It was only then that he realised he knew far too little about his own family and the world outside, with no way for him to link everything together logically. Fatigue finally got to his weakened body and mind, and he couldn't help but lean against the desk and fall deep asleep...

Some time later, a little bronze bell magically began to ring within the room, awakening Richard from his dreams. He rubbed his eyes in a daze, finding that it was already night. The room was already pitch black, with only a small area lit up by the moonlight coming through the window.

The bronze bell continued to sound, and was followed by a gentle knock on his door. Richard opened it to find his butler, but instead of dinner he was brought to the basement of the castle's keep to participate in an internal trial of the family.

A short while later, a bewildered Richard followed the butler to a floor underneath the castle's main tower. The corridors here were different from the damp and dark of the castle, instead being dry and stuffy. Passing through a large gate guarded by two fully-armed footsoldiers, Richard was brought into an underground hall of considerable scale.

This hall was hundreds of square metres large, and two floors tall. The walls were made of rock, and had a few dark red flags hung on them that could be considered decorations.

At the end of the hall was a platform with five chairs. Gatton was seated in the middle, with Goliath and Alice in order on his right. On his left was an aged mage, followed by an icy middle-aged man dressed in black leather armour. Lined at the two sides of the hall against the wall were many other Archerons, and he recognised a few youths that he'd seen on the day of the banquet.

Richard headed to the sides, standing amongst the crowd. The two large wooden doors with iron embedded in them slowly closed, and with a desolate and distant sound of a bell a corner gate was opened in the hall. A bare-chested, boorish-looking warrior carried Warren and walked to the middle of the hall.

# Book 1, Chapter 90 - Punishment

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“What are you doing? Bastard, get your hands off me! I am Gaton’s son, the son of the family head! What right do you have to treat me like this? Are you trying to revolt?” Warren exclaimed at the top of his voice along the way, and resisted with all his might, but the warrior managed to carry him with the ease of carrying a little chick. His eyes were covered by a piece of black cloth, and he couldn’t see what was going on around him. And while there was a fair number of people around in the hall, nobody made a noise.

He seemed to sense something when he was brought to the centre of the hall, suddenly stopping his shouts as he involuntarily began to tremble. Gaton nodded towards the warrior, and he took off Warren’s blindfold.

The sudden, piercing brightness forced Warren to close his eyes. Only after a long time did he manage to see what was going on in the hall. He immediately realised that this was a trial, and he began trembling even more violently to the point that he couldn’t even stand up straight. Only with the warrior behind him supporting his weight did he not collapse to the ground. After seeing the state Warren was in, the old man and middle-aged man on Gaton’s left shook their heads, expressions turning cold.

Warren suddenly shouted, “Father, what’s going on? Why did they suddenly apprehend me? Save me!” Near the end, his shouts turned into wails, and he did all he could to run towards Gaton. However, the large hands of the warrior behind him were like iron, and he had no way to struggle free.

Gaton originally looked calm, with his expression deadpan, but now he began to stroke his short mustache with a smile. Only those familiar with the man would be aware that this was when he was at his scariest.

He made a small hand gesture and the warrior cupped Warren’s

mouth, disallowing him from making any more sounds. When things got slightly quieter in the hall, he looked to the left and right, “Warren is here now. What are your opinions?”

Goliath sneered and said, “That half-legendary ring is iron-clad proof! Do you still need to ask me about this?”

Alice nodded as well, saying coldly, “There’s too much evidence.”

“Guilty,” the old mage said.

“Guilty,” said the middle-aged man as well.

Warren suddenly began to struggle with all his might, wanting to say something, but could not release himself from the hold of the warrior behind him no matter what he did. In a moment of desperation, he even bit at the warrior’s palm, but it was as if he was biting at elephant skin. Not only did he leave no traces behind, he almost lost his own teeth.

Gaton nodded and then said calmly and imposingly, “Fine. There is enough evidence to prove that Warren colluded with Raymond Joseph and attempted to murder Richard Archeron, causing Knight Senma, who was in charge of his protection, to end up gravely injured in a risky circumstance. Since Richard was determined to be a core member of the family by the elders, Warren’s punishment will be immediate execution.”

Warren’s struggling suddenly ceased, and as if all the strength in his body had been sapped out he slumped down. If not for the warrior still holding onto him, he would have completely crumpled to the ground.

“NOOOOO!” A piercing scream sounded from amidst the crowd, and an absolutely stunning young woman darted to the centre of the hall, embracing Warren tightly. She did her best to shove at the warrior and save Warren, but no matter how she kicked, hit, or bit him, he remained unmoving like a rock. The woman was only level 3 or 4 at best, and that was far too little for her to cause any

damage to him.

The woman finally realised her actions against the warrior were in vain, and instead turned to yell at Gaton, “Richard is your son, but Warren isn’t? My Warren grew up by your side, but what about that bastard that just suddenly showed up from the mountains? Besides, isn’t he still alive and standing there well? Why are you executing Warren?”

Gaton frowned and answered calmly, “This is a meeting of the Archeron Family. You may be one of my women, Jade, but you have no right to speak here. And while I’m not in our family lands very often, don’t assume I don’t know how you’ve raised him! If not for you, he wouldn’t have such guts!”

Jade suddenly jumped up, roaring at Gaton like a lioness, “So what if it’s me? I want him to crawl towards the top and get the most power in the family and beat down all the people in his way! Gaton, don’t think I don’t know that the reason you wanted me was because I’m a half-elf, and look slightly similar to that elf who’s always in your thoughts! I know Richard is her child, which is why you’re killing my Warren for this little bastard!”

Gaton chuckled and merely said, “Jade, don’t forget yourself. You don’t have the right to speak here.”

The old mage at Gaton’s left lightly waved, and a muting spell was tossed towards Jade, resulting in her voice immediately vanishing. Two warriors charged out and forcefully dragged her to a corner.

However, she continued to struggle as if she had gone crazy. While the muting spell made it such that she could not make a sound, heartbreaking cries seemed to resound in the hall.

Goliath stared at Gaton, and let loose a booming chuckle that made him seem like a man-eating beast, “Gaton, this woman of yours really is very gutsy. What’s the punishment for interrupting a family trial? My brain hasn’t been serving me too well lately!”

Gaton turned ashen and made a sound, “Ten lashes... Alice, you do it!”

Alice had no intentions whatsoever of rejecting this. She stood up and took a leather whip from a bare-chested warrior, drawing it back slightly with her wrists before cracking it a few times in quick succession. The whip was like a toxic dragon as it struck Jade’s body, tearing her clothing up and leaving a bloody welt on her skin!

Jade suddenly gasped, and her body went stiff before she began to tremble vigorously. The whip continued to crack, hitting her body with a consistent strength. The half-elf had fainted long before the tenth, and once it was done Gaton waved for two warriors to drag her out of the trial hall.

Gaton watched Warren and then took a look around, before speaking in a low voice sternly, “While us Archerons have never been united nor do we promote unity, true Archerons will not harm each other. This is a tradition passed down from the ancestors, and nobody can defy it, not even my own son. In Faust, in Norland, in the numerous planes, we have never had a lack of enemies, which is why there is no need for enemies within our midst. If anyone else wishes to go against this principle, then let this be an example!”

Gaton raised his right hand, lay it flat, and pressed it down.

The warrior in the centre of the hall raised Warren, the muscles all over his body twisting as he then lightly knocked the middle of Warren’s back with a fist. His body went completely stiff, eyes as wide as they could ever get, and his throat moved, but he could not make a sound! His body shook a few times, and he then crumpled to the ground, the lustre in his eyes rapidly dissipating.

As he watched the life seep out of Warren’s body, Richard could not describe how he was feeling. It definitely wasn’t sympathy or pity; no, all his suspicions and the abnormalities he’d noticed

linked together in that moment. It was no wonder that Warren still wanted to provoke Faulk despite his lack of battle might. No wonder that Senma was seriously injured, no wonder that the duel had actually been premeditated murder. Richard had no pity or sympathy for this boy who wanted to kill him, no. If Warren hadn't died today, then someday in the future he would have made sure to force him into a dead end.

No, what Richard paid attention to was Jade's words. Her description of Gaton confused him greatly. Was she speaking the truth? Had Gaton lived all these years with a certain elf in his heart?

# Book 1, Chapter 91 - The Cornerstone Of Heroes

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News of the trial within the Archeron Family quickly spread out to Faust's nobility. Some were shocked by the news, while others were left deep in thought.

In a private library within the Joseph Castle on the sixth island of the sixth layer, Raymond was in a rare state of deep thought as he listened to a report on the trial. After a long time, he turned to Valen, "Gaton isn't just disciplining his family with this; he's also telling all the nobles of Faust that this matter isn't done yet. His own son is dead, but Faulk is still alive."

Valen fell silent, a grave expression on his face. With their assassination attempt failed, it didn't seem like the Archerons had suffered any losses. In fact, they managed to cripple Faulk and several youths from their subordinate families as well. Although those other youths weren't from the fourteen, they were still children of nobles who'd settled down permanently in Faust proper. Even Earl Goliath had to bear an entire week of suspicion and enquiry for that— although Gaton was also a member of the assembly, being in the seventh layer only gave one the power to vote, not veto.

Alas, the matter was fated to reach no conclusion. The Sacred Alliance Assembly was just that— a place where the members of the alliance met to discuss affairs. Whether the results of the votes were executed depended on the checks and balances of the various powers behind the scenes. An Earl as tyrannical as Goliath couldn't possibly be sentenced to anything severe just for harming a few noble children.

Besides, even though the public was allowed to sit in at the assemblies, only the fourteen families actually possessed official seats. The members of these families at least knew everything,



including inside information about the issue with Faulk. The week spent on making things difficult for Goliath was simply to help the average families feel better about themselves and keep their reputations intact after he hurt their children. Without any major infighting in the Alliance right now, some covering up was necessary.

Still... Not only was Gaton able to find evidence against Warren immediately, he'd also called for an internal trial on the same night and executed Warren in front of the entire family. It was impossible for a trial of such scale to be kept secret, but it wasn't like he wanted it hushed anyway.

The conclusion now would be that, since Gaton had lost a son, Duke Joseph had to as well. However, that son could not be Faulk. On the other hand, he'd also transmitted a clear message to all the nobles of Faust— Richard Archeron was the one person that was completely off limits. Anyone who even wanted to touch him had to be prepared to face a war with all the Archerons.

Valen stood up, responding solemnly, "Young master, the status of Richard in the Archeron family is much greater than we had anticipated. This time around, Gaton even directly declared that he is one of the core members of the family, though he hasn't even made a real rune knight yet. There must be some inside news that we did not get. I think we have to prepare for war."

Raymond sighed, feeling helpless, "The war between us and the Archerons never stopped. However, this means that we can't attack Richard in Faust anymore. If we do something like this again, then that's a provocation not to the Archerons but to Bloodthirsty Philip himself. Master Valen, you need to make some preparations. We need to move to the Mason plane as quickly as possible— the war there needs to be ended quickly so we can free up our elites. We have a troop stationed in the family territory already, but we need to increase our vigour in espionage. I need information on Gaton's privately-owned planes so that we can

attack as soon as circumstances permit.”

Valen nodded, assuring him, “Don’t worry too much, Young Master. The Archerons have Richard, but that can only bring everything back to square one. Aren’t you a runemaster yourself?”

Raymond shook his head, “I can’t produce compound runes of that quality yet. My runecrafting is definitely inferior to his.”

“But Young Master, Richard definitely can’t compare to you in knowledge, and leadership and governance. You are the hero who will bring the Josephs to the fifth layer!”

“Hero?” Raymond laughed mockingly, “With a body as weak and frail as mine, how can I become any heroic character? I doubt I’ll be able to cross level 5 as a warrior in my lifetime.”

A faint look of sorrow flit across Valen’s face. “But you still have the gift of magic. It is a great feat to be a level 12 mage at your age, and you’re a scholar of Soremburg on top!”

“You’re not wrong!” Raymond burst out laughing, as if his world had suddenly filled with sunshine.

Though Valen was smiling along with his master, he knew in his heart that what Raymond lacked the most was time. If he couldn’t break through as a warrior, he had less than twenty years left to live. Twenty years was but the blink of an eye in the planar wars. But with the innate flaws in his physique, it would be a miracle for Raymond to achieve any such thing.

In the endless planar wars, with the chaotic and turbulent times, the one cornerstone for a hero to rise was mere survival.

Be it in reality or the void, the fifth layer was always up high in Faust. The islands were far above the level of the city proper, the highest points of their orbits almost reaching the Church of the Eternal Dragon. It would take more than a century to push the Josephs to the fifth layer. Compared to all of history, twenty years was as insignificant as a small flower in a long river.

There wasn't much land even on the fourth island of the fifth layer, where the valiant emperor of the Sacred Alliance, Bloodthirsty Philip, lived. At a kilometre and a half in diameter it was the biggest of the occupied islands, but it was still difficult to put something as magnificent and vast as the Sacred Alliance's Imperial Palace into such a small place. Despite prevalent use of spatial magic, a lot of the space needed for gardens had to be given up.

The palace was built into the mountain itself, with the main hall sitting on the top which had been flattened out manually. Every window, every balcony, and every pillar of this seventeen-storey-tall building was adorned with innumerable exquisite carvings. Individually, every part was rich in historical and artistic value, yet when piled together, they did not seem to be in harmony.

When the pale golden light of dawn gradually filled the dining hall of the palace at breakfast, the long table was already filled with light refreshments and wine to whet the appetite. Ten maids stood by the side in attendance, carrying silver trays of food. Several court officials, dressed to the teeth and with wigs on, also stood by in preparation to report the happenings of the day before.

A crisp and melodious bell started to chime in the breakfast hall, and a bird larger than a mountain falcon suspended from a copper stand on the ceiling started to chirp, "All hail the Emperor! All hail the Emperor!"

A door on the other side of the hall opened, and a tall, strong-looking man walked in. He stood over seven feet tall and had a curly blonde wig, his skin glowing like Faust's sunlight as well. A shiny flush radiated from his cheeks—which trembled as he walked—as well as his moustache that was shaped like a smile. A weaved satin top concealed a shockingly large belly, outlined in gold and secured with a wide golden belt. The belt was embedded with all sorts of gems; the buckle of the belt was even embellished with an Azshara star diamond! This jewel was precious enough to

be included as a core component in a level-five rune or legendary item, yet it was being used purely as a powerless ornament on this belt.

This man, who was dressed so extravagantly it was almost amusing, was none other than the supreme emperor of the Sacred Alliance, Bloodthirsty Phillip.

Moving his enormous body to the dining table, he barely managed to squeeze into a chair three times the average size with great effort. Panting roughly, he exclaimed, “The chair became smaller again!”

# Book 1, Chapter 92 - Appetite Determines Power

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A delicate-looking, lanky court official immediately bowed deeply, saying solemnly, “The chair is completely at fault! I’ll have it replaced right away! As for this thing with the audacity to shrink, it’ll be taken care of accordingly after it gets dragged away!”

Philip waved his enormous hand, “That’s not necessary right now. Eating is what matters most, it can wait until I finish my meal.” He held up a custom-made goblet, drinking about a bottle and a half’s worth of aperitif in a single gulf. Then, with another brief wave, all eight plates piled with appetizers were emptied into his bottomless pit of a mouth.

The maids immediately rushed in, skillfully clearing the empty plates before serving the main course one dish after the other. Judging simply from their nimble movements, it was clear that they were knights or assassins of at least level 4 or 5. While a dining table which could hold ten dishes at once may seem large, it merely appeared average in the Emperor’s presence. They then removed the silver lids off the next set of plates, revealing enormous steaks so raw they were still flush with blood. The origin of this meat was unknown, and even those who’d served here for more than three years couldn’t identify every type of meat. Although the edges of the plates were garnished with fresh flowers and a sauce, the steaks themselves were almost fully raw. Raw steak was the Emperor’s favourite dish.

Philip’s eyes lit up. Before digging in he threw a piece of ribeye steak mid-air, upon which that peculiar bird swooped down to catch the meal before taking it back to its own perch and pecking at it intently. The Emperor himself began to polish off kilograms of raw meat at an astonishing speed, one piece after the other.

However it was strangely quiet when he ate, with barely any sound of chewing coming from his mouth. This piece of dining etiquette was the closest the Emperor came to fulfilling any sort of aristocratic manners. As for the massive bones in the steaks, they silently disappeared down the Emperor's throat as if they were meat as well.

Another court official cleared his throat, and began to recount the past happenings in the day in a melodious voice. It was mainly about an important event that took place while the Emperor was sleeping at night. "The grey dwarves and their beast allies launched a sneak attack on the Thunder God's Fort. Of course, they were fought off... As for your immediate territory of Munro, the first round of taxes were just levied, with the total being...

"The Archerons also held an internal trial last night—"

"Wait!" Philip swallowed a mouthful of meat with some difficulty, "What were you saying just now? Gaton killed his own son, Warren?"

"That's right!"

Phillip put down his fork and knife for once, and thought for a while before saying, "Seems like that Richard is an interesting character, Gaton should intend to let him become the successor. What do you know about Richard?"

"He's a personal apprentice of Sharon..."

"What?!" The Emperor spat out a mouthful of unchewed meat in response.

The court official was astonished as well. Yet, he waved his hand at once and maids flocked over to clear the mess on the table. At the same time, they passed down orders to the kitchen to prepare ten more portions of the main dish. This instantaneous reaction was enough to show his capabilities as a court official.

Phillip coughed a little, spitting out another half-chewed bone

before he breathed in, “Which Sharon are you talking about...”

The court official replied carefully, “The Alliance Guardian. You personally conferred the title upon her...”

The Emperor looked unsettled. He asked, “What has she been up to recently?”

Information about the legendary mage was obviously a priority for them. The court official was ready, replying immediately, “I heard Her Excellency has been exploring planes a lot recently. It’s been a long time since she returned to the Deepblue.”

It was only then that the Emperor looked slightly more at ease. He stopped eating for once, and looked at the entire table of steak before he said ruefully, “Oh dear, this woman... When she came looking for me back then, she actually wanted to compete with me in terms of appetite!”

“Your Majesty, you certainly claimed an overwhelming victory!” The court official immediately said. This was not entirely flattery.

The Emperor snorted, and said after a long time, “It was merely a small victory... no, in fact it was just a narrow one.”

“Your Majesty, you are truly a noble ruler to be able to hold the legendary mage down!” The court official pretended not to notice the Emperor’s tone and continued to praise him relentlessly.

“It was merely good luck back then. If she were to come again now, the outcome of the competition may not be the same anymore. Never underestimate the legendary mage, even if it is just in terms of appetite!” The Emperor chided.

“Certainly! Of course!” The court official repeatedly nodded in agreement.

Philip waved his enormous hand and said, “How about this, you can go prepare a ton of dragon’s rib steak later and give it to Richard in my name. Just say that these are extra meals for him!”

“One ton of dragon’s rib steak!” The court official inhaled sharply in an exaggerated manner, and politely expressed his objection, “Isn’t it a little too much for him to finish? We have less than a hundred tonnes total in the kitchen.”

Philip impatiently waved his enormous hand, “Just do as I say! Appetite determines power! Don’t tell me a young lad who caught Sharon’s eye can’t even finish this bit of food? But there really isn’t much stock left in the kitchen... Why don’t you think of ways to buy first, and get General Garmel to lead men on a hunt for a few more dragons. I don’t want green dragons, their meat is sour! He knows my taste!”

He then thought for a while before saying to the aged and thin vice minister of financial affairs who was on the other side, “Go to my treasury and see if there’s any tools there that can be used for self-defense. Take two of them and give them to Richard, together with the steak. It doesn’t have to be the best, as long as it is sufficient to make it clear that I am on their side. After all, Gaton is considered a member of royalty as well. We cannot let his new successor meet with any mishaps in Faust. Otherwise, those who create trouble for him should also need to pay a price for it.”

“How should we deal with Faulk, then?” the court official who came forward to report the matter inquired.

“Leave it to those old folks from the assembly, we shall not meddle. Let the Josephs and Archerons battle first!”

Richard discovered after the trial that people were looking at him differently now. The hostility and disdain had faded, and whenever he was out the increase in the number of people taking the initiative to greet him was obvious. And they were all more respectful than before as well!

Additionally, he’d now been allocated a laboratory for his own use. He could craft elementary and grade 2 runes, performing experiments of a similar level as well. He was also assigned two



assistants, and three people to help run errands. At the same time, Gatton had also delegated four young and rather powerful knights as a reference for Richard to study his own creation of rune knights.

It was barely past lunchtime. Less than two hours since he'd been notified of the laboratory, Richard was already rushing towards the place. Magic held far greater of an attraction to him than the Archeron surname.

With how small the island was, the laboratory was a short walk from his residence. It was one of only three, all built on the fringes of the island for the sake of safety, and was protected by two magic ballista towers. This way, the island was protected from external enemies. At the same time, in the event that an explosion took place in the laboratory, the extent of damage could also be minimized.

The laboratory was a three-storey building that took up little space. The first floor was an administrative and leisure area, meant for the assistants and servants. The second was a storehouse for magic materials, while the third was his actual workplace.

But as he set foot on the third level and entered the laboratory, Richard's brows creased together at once. Even with all three floors together this place still wasn't as large as his laboratory in the Deepblue. The sign engraved on a corner of the desk suggested that this was a product of dwarven make, built with refined gold about thirty years ago. As far as normal magic laboratories went, this place was above average. However, the one Richard had been using in the Deepblue had been designed exclusively three hundred years ago, by a now-extinct dwarven kingdom. There were few of its kind in the world.

# Book 1, Chapter 93 - Unexpected Offering

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The other equipment in the laboratory was similar to what he had in his own, but even they were still at least three grades lower in quality. Just the work desk alone from the Deepblue was worth more than all the three laboratories of this island combined.

Two assistants, a man and woman both over the age of twenty, were already prepared in the laboratory. The man was a level 8 mage, while the woman a level 10. As Richard walked in, they were carefully cleaning all the apparatus in the place alongside a teenage girl.

Looking at her from behind, Richard found this girl vaguely familiar. When she turned around, it gave him a huge shock, “Coco?”

The last time Richard had seen Coco was when he’d attended the banquet to select a partner. The lights were dim that night, and her demure and elegant demeanour against that romantic volcanic backdrop had left an impression in his mind. However, he’d completely forgotten about her after the banquet. In terms of leaving an impression, she could not compare to Demi or Venica.

Seeing Coco here once more surprised Richard. It seemed to suggest that Coco’s father wasn’t able to support her well. The Archerons did provide some resources to the youths sent to the island, but those resources came largely in the form of free training, and didn’t give much for one’s day to day life.

Even though Faust was cheaper than the Deepblue, it was still more expensive than the rest of the Alliance. The Deepblue’s wares were extravagantly priced because they sold high-end products, with everything able to be described as luxurious goods. On the other hand, even basic necessities like food or clothing were priced unreasonably in Faust. But then again, Faust and the surrounding Eternal Plains weren’t fertile enough for agriculture to be a

possibility. Any food had to be transported from far away to the top of the mountain, making just the transportation fee exorbitant. And this wasn't even considering other expenses.

Coco seemed to grow rather anxious upon seeing Richard. She took a step back, as if to hide herself behind one of the assistants, but because of how small the laboratory was she immediately bumped into a rack of potions. The ten or so test tubes at the front of the rack swayed dangerously, and a few almost fell down.

The female mage furrowed her brows, speaking sternly, "COCO! Why are you always so clumsy? You wouldn't be able to pay for those test tubes even if you wanted to! What if this happened when Master Richard was in the middle of an experiment? The family gave you a great chance to work here, so stop your vain attempts to amount to something greater. You'll never be able to rise through the ranks to become Master Richard's partner!"

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" Coco's face was pale, as she bowed incessantly. Tears welled up in her eyes, but she forcefully held them back. Having been denounced by the female mage, she stuttered as she tried to explain: "No! I never held those intentions, really!"

"Are you sure? Ha!" The female mage mocked, while the male mage furrowed his brows and remained quiet as well. Richard was undoubtedly the most eligible bachelor in the Archeron Family, the target of even highly-sought-after girls like Demi and Venica. While bloodline was the most important factor, Richard's talent, future prospects, and stellar appearance were other important reasons. After the night of the trial, the news of him becoming a core member of the family had already been spread around, signifying his entrance into the hierarchy of the family's power. Perhaps it was a bit too premature to talk about the powers he possessed yet, but Richard was only 15 years old, and everything had just begun.

As for Coco, she could neither choose nor reject a partner for

herself. Hence, the two assistants thought that her statement about not having any such thoughts were extremely fake. Any Archeron who chose to come to the floating island had very obvious intentions.

In Norland, one's strength came from their physical body, while their demeanour originated from factors ranging from one's bloodline, family background, education, cultivation, and one's personal abilities. A woman's worth was the sum of all of the factors above. Those like Coco, who had personal attributes such as an exquisite appearance and a elegant demeanour, were a dime a dozen. In the large-scale slave markets, one would be able to easily find half-elf teenage girls that would rival Coco's appearance and elegance. Furthermore, Coco's weak physique and her current status as a level 2 illusionist suggested she had no talent to speak of. As such, it was practically impossible for her to become a woman of standing. If she couldn't even cast a level 2 illusion, how would she possess any semblance of rich magic and and refined knowledge? Even if she were to memorise everything, she would be at a disadvantage compared to powerful mages who had intellectual capabilities common people could only dream of.

As for artistic abilities... who cared?

The assistants would still be able to accept Coco being inept at the job. However, her defensive attitude had crossed their bottom line. It seemed the girl herself realised this, however, so she stopped trying to explain herself. She instead lowered her head and placed herself at the mercy of the female mage, allowing the woman to berate her. Only this time, the tears that she was fighting hard to control eventually slid down her face, one after another. This job was very important to Coco, which explained why she did not rebut the female mage nor leave without a word even though the woman wasn't mincing her words. In a place like Norland, where the difference in status and power was pronounced, walking away from such a situation wouldn't just

lead to one losing their job.

Richard furrowed his brows, and tried to defuse the situation, “Alright, end it here. We didn’t lose anything anyway. I’ll be starting an experiment, so please just set up the work table.”

The man began to inject mana into the table, while Richard passed a list he’d prepared before this for the female mage to get from the warehouse. While waiting for the table to be ready, he had Coco, who was about to leave, to bring over an inventory of the materials in the warehouse. When she handed him a thin notebook and was about to leave again, he gave her a list of apparatus that he had written to prepare for later use.

Coco looked at Richard with a confused expression, before nodding her head vigorously as she conscientiously went on to do her work. She too knew that this was an alternate form of protection. If she did whatever Richard told her to well, she would naturally be allocated more work to do. In places like these, many would jump at the chance of doing more work, actually fearing a lack. In brief, she would not be asked to leave the laboratory for no good reason.

As the female mage prepared the materials, Richard read the store checklist and let out a huge sigh. The quality of the materials in the Archeron warehouse was a far cry from that in the Deepblue, and even the quantities couldn’t match up. He saw barely any grade 2 materials in the list, forget grade 3 or 4. Materials in Norland were classified the same way as runes. A rune of a particular grade would require its core materials to be of that grade.

Looking at what he had on hand, Richard realised that there weren’t enough resources to craft even many standard runes here, forget the incomplete custom designs he had. Resource-wise, the Archerons had to be the poorest of the fourteen families of Faust, not comparable even to the minor nobles who didn’t even have their own islands.

At this moment, he thought back to the first words Steelrock had said about them, “They’re poor!”

The second thought that flashed across Richard’s mind was the rune materials Wennington had passed to him a few days ago. It appeared as if those materials couldn’t be from the Archeron warehouse... However, Richard did not put too much thought to it, and quickly tossed the thought to the back of his head.

# Book 1, Chapter 94 - Unexpected Offering

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Richard flipped through the few pages at the back of the list, looking at the pitiful amount of grade 2 materials in the family, and shook his head helplessly. For the first time in his life, he found himself needing to carefully plan his ingredients.

He already had a rune knight model in mind, but without the proper materials he would have to stop that halfway through. He wanted to match a custom-designed Eruption rune with two Elementary Strength runes and a Vitality rune, giving the mount a Dash rune that was again a custom design. This sort of rune knight would possess terrifying instant offence, giving them a 150% boost to their offensive power when Eruption combined with the strength runes. Vitality would boost their endurance in compensation, shortening the time they needed to rest after battle. The core of this plan would be the three runes he'd designed himself.

After rethinking the quantity and scope of the materials he could use, Richard had no choice but to give up on all non-standard. However, he made a new list, writing out ten or so materials that would raise the effects of the standard runes and handed it to the female mage to purchase. He'd inquired already, knowing that there was still some money left over from the construction of the laboratory, so as long as he spent within a certain limit he didn't need to apply for money from the family. With all arrangements in order, Richard used the materials he already had at hand and began crafting a rune.

Once immersed in the world of magic, Richard temporarily forgot all the worries in the world. As had been his habit in the past, he did everything from scratch. He'd already decided to create his first batch of rune knights all by himself, including preparing the materials.

One by one, the materials were refined. It was as if the

complicated procedures were carved into Richard's mind, and there was no need to check any notes or books whatsoever. A thick, large, and heavy piece of magic beast hide was carved into three pieces, his hands extremely steady as he used the knife. One could see practically no difference in the thicknesses of the three pieces if they looked with the naked eye.

As he drew the magic formation, Richard was like the most precise of dwarven gold-smelting machines, working for hours on end without the slightest of mistakes. Lines flowed from the tip of the magic pen, each curve not one whit different from the standard design.

Every time Richard began drawing the magic formation, the two assistants could not help but halt their breathing, afraid to make any sound and unwilling to let any detail escape their eyes. Never in their dreams did they think that the magic formations that existed as standard pictures in their books could be replicated before their eyes with not a single difference! *Was this the world of runemasters?*

They tried to remember every move of his, every detail; all the steps while preparing the materials, and every hand gesture. This was their greatest benefit as assistants— they could observe the experiments of a runemaster at close proximity. Now, they could learn all about Richard's methods and his secrets. Even if they didn't have the talent for runecrafting themselves, an improved ability to draw magic formations would still be very beneficial to them. If they could just learn some procedures that only needed practice to master, the scope of their careers would increase greatly.

With every section that Richard finished, he would take a rest. The time he took to make each section varied between an hour and three, but when Richard rested, he would always find that his two helpers looked more tired than he was. Studying also sapped at one's physical strength. When Richard was refreshed once more,



they still looked pale and unsteady on their feet. With his Vitality rune equipped, the speed of his recovery was several times higher than that of these two mages.

This way, the two helpers actually weren't doing much, while Coco helped with passing the materials or tools over at the side. Under Richard's guidance, she even successfully washed an intermediate equipment and did all the assistants' work. This time, the female mage did not scold her, because she could spend all her energy on learning and pass on all the miscellaneous work to the girl.

Four days later, an Elementary Strength rune was completed, the pace having left the two assistants dumbstruck. After using a specially-made box to store the rune, Coco who was standing by the side passed a piece of paper over. In neat and clean writing, the total sum based on market prices of all the materials used in the creation of the rune were listed out in a detailed manner, including the quantity used. This was a record Richard wanted her to make at the same time, and this paper indicated how diligent and attentive she was.

At the bottom of the paper was the total sum of all the materials, in other words the costs of the materials of the rune, which came to 17200 gold coins. This came as a surprise to Richard, and he smiled at Coco, while she secretly stuck her tongue out. She obviously knew the average price of an elementary rune, which was why the total cost was a huge surprise to her as well.

Of course, this was merely the costs of the materials. If one wanted to go into the details, then the pay of Coco and the assistants, the rent of the laboratory as well as wear and tear of equipment, and other costs would all add up. Lastly was another huge expense— Richard's time. Not putting his price into consideration, the cost of the rune was about twenty thousand. Due to the rate of failure, the average runemaster would have a cost nearing sixty thousand

However, Richard was not satisfied with this rune. As he lacked some key ingredients, he could only make it based on the standard version, and the final amplification effect was exactly the same as the standard one at 30%. When put on the market, the price would be around seventy to a hundred thousand at most.

While he was unsatisfied with the effects of the Elementary Strength rune, Richard could only continue, because this was all the materials he had. The materials he needed to improve this were not something he could purchase in the near future. Price was secondary. Many materials, such as flamestripe stones, were often out of stock due to multiple uses and low supply. One could only exchange for them with families that had mines in their territory.

The new model Richard had decided to use was a traditional jack-of-all trades, with one strength rune, two defence runes, an agility rune and a powered-up mount. Such knights were useful on any battlefield, but in exchange they couldn't exactly turn the tides of as many. Using them well would require wisdom from the commander. The total cost of a knight's rune would be about a hundred thousand gold coins, and that of the armour, weapons and mount was at about twenty thousand gold coins. However, this did not include the energy and value of Richard's time.

Richard was extremely proficient in these standard runes, which was why when he began the second strength rune, he was soon immersed in the world of magic again.

# Book 1, Chapter 95 - Unexpected Offering

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Floe Bay was glowing in its summer beauty. The grand mages of the Deepblue had all met up as usual in Sharon's public meeting hall, about to discuss the operations of the Deepblue for the following month. From the french window here, one could take in the entire beauty of Floe Bay.

All of them looked relaxed, Blackgold included. While they hadn't had the extra income from Richard's runes in the past year or so, the amount of Sharon's Delight they'd given out had also decreased in turn. The grey dwarf quite liked this situation, because the financial condition was much more stable and easier to predict. Anyone working in finance hated uncertainty in either direction.

It didn't take a long time for the discussion to come to a conclusion. The mages all completed their arrangements for July and August, falling into some rare idle chatter. Sharon hadn't participated this time, but there was no need for her regular presence anyway. The grand mages could take care of most of the work, and the legendary mage's whereabouts were often unpredictable. After the blow from Mountainsea, she'd been gone for months at a time to the endless planes to earn money. While it had been two years, the effects had yet to completely disappear.

Now, for instance, the grand mages had not seen Sharon for nearly three months, and nobody knew how long she would wander the various planes before her return.

In the past, there was often more joy than worry when Sharon returned. Recently, however, the grand mages learned from her words that the places she went to were quickly diminishing in profits. With the strength of her dragon-repelling aura increasing with each expedition, the difficulty in capturing greater dragons increased as well. With the dragons now able to sense her arrival from a hundred kilometres away, they would immediately flee.

Even the legendary mage found it hard to make up for that distance. In fact, more mature and powerful dragons even had the time to pack up their most precious treasures before taking off!

Just as the grand mages were relaxedly enjoying the great afternoon sunshine, a violent magic undulation ripped through the hall. Chaotic elemental particles spread in all directions, repelling and charging into each other as the hall was quickly enveloped by a small storm. The mana in the grand mages began to stir, and with it being so unexpected the protective magics of the grand mages were completely ineffective as the storm caused them to sway everywhere.

Just as all the shocked mages did their best to control the chaotic magic, an exceedingly terrifying, berserk aura descended upon the place, leaving them all without the ability to even move or think.

This pressure came from a disparity of strength, similar to a dragon's aura with regular humans. However, to be able to completely pressure them even with an elemental storm here, this was a strength that far surpassed even the legendary mage!

While everyone was overwhelmed with shock, a teleportation gate suddenly opened at the centre, and a snow-white and satiny thigh peeked out amidst the brilliant rays of magic. But then, as if pulled by an invisible hand, it was forced back into the gate.

The abrupt change, with the large gap between the terrifying aura and snow-white thigh, immediately caused the grand mages' thoughts to short-circuit for a moment. The portal closed for a moment, gone as quickly as it opened, but just as it seemed to disappear it shone brightly all of a sudden, spitting out mottled light like it was a fountain.

Whoosh! The familiar figure of the legendary mage charged out of the portal. She turned around in mid-air the moment she was out, shooting out a dazzling ray of light that slammed into the gate.

The teleportation gate flickered violently, to the point that the

space around it was showing signs of twisting, but it did not shrink as the legendary mage had anticipated. Instead, it increased in size a few times, to the point that it nearly filled up the space in the tremendous hall.

The leaping rays of magic dimmed till it was almost impossible to see, and the raging waves of corrosive hot air occupied everyone's senses. An enormous demon head peeked out of the gate, its sharp horn rubbing against the edges as if this wasn't a portal made of magic but a solid body. Numerous sparks flew out, and the sound of metal crashing against metal rang within the hall. The most striking thing on the head was the terrifying large mouth with fierce teeth all over, large enough to swallow all of the grand mages a short distance away. There were ten or so forked tongues within, coiled together like snakes. They reached out over ten metres far, practically licking Sharon's fingers!

This boundless and deep aura that could stimulate the fear in the depths of a race made it clear to the grand mages that this great demon had a rank that far exceeded their knowledge. When the front half of the demon's head peeked out of the teleportation gate, the pressure had left the grand mages paralysed on the ground. The little bit of mana they had somehow been able to gather dissipated instantly, and the raging elements in the hall had long since gone quiet except for a portion that was timidly coiled at the legendary mage's side.

The demon did its best to peek further in, but with the legendary mage controlling it, the teleportation gate finally began to slowly shrink. Failing when success was in sight, the demon descended into fury. Its large mouth opened and closed as it roared loudly, "Sharon, don't let me see you in the abyss again!"

The legendary mage hummed and valiantly gestured her middle finger at the demon, "I've already heard this twice from you!"

The pulling force from the other side of the gate immediately strengthened, and the time of activation of the channel between

planes reached its limit. The enraged great demon was forcefully sent back to the abyss, and the teleportation gate then completely closed off. However, the aura of flames and rot still pervaded the air, leaving proof of the connection with the abyss just then.

Due to the shock of the pressure from the demon, the minds of the grand mages were still half frozen. It took them a moment to recover, and in this period of time the one thing that stuck in their minds was that middle finger from the legendary mage.

The grand mages struggled to get up one after another, and only then did they notice how terrible the legendary mage looked. She seemed to be even worse off than they were.

A part of her long hair had been singed, and her blue legendary magic robes were damaged everywhere. Her skirt was practically torn into rags, revealing more than half of her snow-white thighs. Signs of burns could be seen everywhere on her skin. The grand mages that had followed her after the Deepblue became peaceful had never seen her so pathetic before, and it was obvious it had been a difficult battle in the abyss.

Two grand mages that had entered Deepblue sixty years ago recalled ruefully, finding that they had seen her this terrible only during the third expansion of Deepblue. At that time, they had merely been young level twelve or thirteen mages, while Sharon herself was only level 16. Most of their memories of then were of war and smoke. Dwarves, orcs, werebeasts, and draconians had allied to attack the Deepblue one after the other, but had been defeated again and again.

The grey dwarves did not know magic, but amongst the orcs were many shamans and mages. While the draconians had the smallest numbers, they were known for their great battle might and powerful spells. At that point, Sharon often fought with countless enemies in the vast Everwinter Mountains, and when she returned to the Deepblue this was often the state she was in. However, at that time, regardless of what kind of dangers there had been, she

was always beautiful and refined, and her eyes were as bright as they were now.

At level 16 Sharon had once left the draconian grand mages fleeing ignominiously. The two grand mages had then fought by her side, pursuing one for nearly a thousand kilometres. They had obtained countless valuable experiences in battle, and understood many secrets of magic. After Sharon officially became a grand mage, it was rare to see her fighting this hard. Once she became a legendary being, the Deepblue had become a forbidden area for many races in the north of the continent.

Having to bear witness to Sharon fighting that hard again naturally left them shocked.

# Book 1, Chapter 96 - Unexpected Offering

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“Your Excellency, was that...” Fayr had already guessed who the demon was from its characteristics and power, but he couldn’t manage to say it out loud.

Sharon groaned and blurted indifferently, “Bermond Gauguin, a greater demon lord from the abyss. That fellow is too narrow-minded. All I did was kill a lesser lord from his level and he chased me for more than a month! Hmph, he didn’t even manage to catch me in the end and I sent him back! Hahaha!”

The legendary mage became more excited as she continued, and she ended up bragging about herself with her classical laughter as a finale. Yet, all the grand mages could not hide their astonishment, and they did not feel that Sharon was being sarcastic at all. Rather, they could say that she was being modest. Even Fayr had thought that was at most a lesser demon lord, not expecting it to be a greater one who ruled an entire level of the abyss! Sharon had even killed a lesser lord!

After laughing hard, Sharon, who had finally cheered up, was reminded of something that she was holding onto on her right hand. She then threw that lump of meat, which was still moving and bleeding, to Fayr, saying, “Seal this up immediately, and send it to that fellow Gaton right away. Right, use the teleportation array to do it. Don’t worry about spending, Gaton will be responsible for these wear and tear costs. Do it quick, this thing is perishable!”

The moment he received the meat lump, Fayr took two steps back to stabilise himself. Although the lump of meat was not big, it was extraordinarily heavy, as though it had the same weight as a crystal of equal volume. It was still wriggling rhythmically, and the wild and confusing odour it emitted made Fayr really frightened. He almost couldn’t get a hold of it, and the others around hurried to give him a hand. They carried the lump of meat



together, running towards the teleportation array to send it off.

On the other hand, the legendary mage started to change her clothes, shower, do some skin maintenance, and eat some fruit. She seemed to be busier than the other grand mages.

Within thirty minutes, when Sharon was still lazing in the bathtub, a magical bell beside her rang melodiously and Fayr's voice rang out, "Her Excellency, that object has been sent. Marquis Gaton wishes to have a word with you. What are your thoughts?"

Sharon laughed gently and replied, "Since that fellow is not afraid to spend money, what's the big deal? Answer the call!"

"Yes!" Fayr's voice disappeared from the magical bell, and shortly after the bell radiated rays of light, casting a three dimensional image in the space in front of Sharon. She could see Gaton holding onto a black seal, his face ashen, staring into the box where the meat was still moving vigorously.

As Sharon caressed her skin, not caring that half of her chest was exposed above the water, she said, "When did you become this indifferent with spending money? Even I feel the pain of spending on such a long-range communication spell! Since you are so rich, pay back those loans that you owe me!"

The other end of the magical projection was at the Archerons' island, in an enclosed room in the basement of the family castle that could only be reached with magic. This basement was themed red and black, with a ceramic table that looked like an altar in the middle. On the altar was a burning flame, with a similar magical image above it from where one could hear Sharon's voice and the sound of splashing.

However, the magical image on Gaton's side did not show the calm scene of Sharon taking a bath, but a projection of Blackgold instead. The projection of the grey dwarf was rotating continuously, tossing out a gold coin for every full turn that increased a number on the top right corner of the image once.

Gaton, however, wasn't interested in the contents of the image. His gaze was fixed on the sealed box, while his expression became worse.

Very quickly, an angry voice sounded in that basement, "Your Excellency! You already know the Archeron bloodline might have traces of demons, but you still send us a demon's heart. This is the second time! My dearest Sharon, can't you just take a detour and walk around in hell instead of the abyss? The devils there will definitely have what you need!"

A loud and beautiful laughter was emitted from the grey dwarf's body, "This is the heart of a lesser demon lord! Hehe, Gaton, you have to be aware that it is not easy to find a greater demon lord of the abyss that cannot catch up to me! That is why I want to walk around in the higher levels. As for hell, I will end up there eventually, but it depends on my mood. You should know clearly that I might have a good mood if you clear your debts."

The moment debts were mentioned, Gaton's confidence went down immediately. He groaned and closed the seal box, saying "I looked too lowly upon Richard. But this item cannot maintain its full magic power for long, I have to go to the Church of the Eternal Dragon to hold the ceremony tonight. I have many things to do. Do you have anything else to say?"

"You don't plan to tell Richard about Elena?"

"Elena..." Gaton smiled bitterly and replied, "How can I tell him? Should I tell him that I was the one who executed his mother's family back then? That the reason she didn't want to come back to me was that hatred coming from the extermination of her nation? How could I tell him about that? Elena's death was my fault!"

"Then are you going to just continue delaying it?"

"What else can I do... Perhaps... Perhaps it'll be resolved one day."

Sharon did not continue any longer, instead changing the topic, “Richard’s mana is growing stronger now. When he passes level 10, the seal I cast on him back then will grow weaker. The nightmare creatures will be able to see him again, and although it’ll be dim at the start he’ll continue to grow clearer and clearer in their world. When the seal completely disappears after twenty years, he will glow like a lighthouse in the dark, attracting countless shadow creatures to Norland. Norland is a prime plane, the effect will be very obvious. You need to send him to a lesser plane to weaken the effect with the spatial distortions. Perhaps that will help stall for some more time.”

Gaton’s expression changed, and he started pondering.

Sharon let out a sigh, “Maybe we don’t have to be so worried. Once the specific shadow creature of that tribe is annihilated, the lighthouse in Richard’s soul will naturally disappear as well. Alright, go on to prepare your ceremony soon, teleportation array communication is very expensive. Blackgold will send you the bill shortly.”

Gaton nodded, but his expression remained the same. The shadow creatures were a strange and mysterious race that wandered the planes. They could be small and weak, or extremely strong. Nobody had ever acquired enough details to understand them, nor did they know how large their population actually was.

The flame on the altar was still burning, but the magical power within the flame had disappeared. The grey dwarf that was rotating above it had vanished too, leaving the moving flame that reflected Gaton’s contrasting expressions.

# Book 1, Chapter 97 - The Road At Night

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Dusk was approaching, and Norland's second sun began to set in the west, the last of its brilliance dyeing the rivers, the horizon, and the entirety of Norland red. In the time it took to shut the arched gates Faust was enveloped by a gentle, fragrant golden glow. It was as if the world stood still, and time passed in tranquility.

Richard released his mana, the beast skin in front of him shining with layers of spell formations like a gentle breeze on a river. Another rune was now completed, and while the effects of it were barely better than the standard he was extremely satisfied considering the materials used. He sat quietly and waited for the power of the spell formation to finish taking effect. Suddenly, a wave of fatigue swept past him, which caused him to feel drowsy. Every time this happened, Richard's first countermeasure was to gulp down a bottle of revitalising potion.

With one hand rubbing his temple, Richard's other hand reached for the side of the table. However, what greeted his hand was not the familiar, icy, smooth touch of the cylinder, but a warm and bouncy piece of flesh. What followed next was a startled gasp, as the piece of flesh hurriedly left his hand. Richard was flabbergasted, and he turned his head. He saw Coco standing a metre away with a flush on her cheeks. She was staring at him in shock, coupled with restrained anger. The piece of flesh that he had grabbed was her buttocks.

Not bad to the touch, but not exceptional. This was the first thought that came to Richard's mind.

Back in the Deepblue, Richard always had a revitalising potion by his side to drink when he was weary. However, the ARcherons could not provide such a good environment, and the few potions they had were saved for times of war. However, Richard had just recently left Deepblue, so this habit of five years would not be that

easy to forget.

‘Maybe I should apologise to her?’ Richard pondered, not knowing how to explain himself.

The two assistants were by his side, so it would be inappropriate of him to comment on the impoverishment of the Archerons. Furthermore, Richard did not think that being poor was something wrong. Right now, he was extremely aware of the vast differences between the outside world and the Deepblue. Take these two helpers, for example. In their lives they would rarely have seen more than a few powerful mana potions, so they would never be able to imagine sustaining one’s daily tasks with such things. This was where the awkwardness lied. Richard wanted to tell the truth, but nobody would believe him.

The female assistant only harrumphed and turned away, not saying a single word. As for the male assistant, his gaze flitted and landed on Coco’s buttocks briefly, before he shrugged his shoulders. As for Coco, her cheeks were still red. She bit on her lower lips, and her eyes seemed to glisten with tears. However, she too did not speak as she continued with her tasks of tidying and preparing the table, except that she now maintained a certain distance from Richard.

In actuality, with the disparity in Richard’s and Coco’s identity, a brief touch of her buttocks was no big deal. Even if the person who touched her was the male assistant, he would at most be reprimanded lightly. If that happened, some might even consider that it was Coco’s motive to bewitch the man.

Richard knew of the many rules of the nobility, and knew that if he were to apologise now it would create trouble for Coco in the future. However, Coco was evidently livid, and her expression betrayed her intentions to stay at a distance away from him, something that caused him to feel rather uncomfortable.

The hourglass was already halfway down, indicating that it was

almost time for dinner. Seeing the many materials and apparatus set up on the table, Richard felt rather impatient. Soon, he tossed the equipment he held in his hand on the experiment table, before standing up and walking away.

However, just as he took two steps forward, he felt something split apart deep in his consciousness, and a incomparably crisp clap sounded loudly before a sliver of iciness mixed with darkness appeared, as if a shadow dissipated in his consciousness.

Richard was taken aback and immediately halted. He concentrated deep on his consciousness, yet could not find any traces of the shadow, as if what had happened was just an illusion. He scanned his body with his senses, but he did not discover anything amiss. However, there was a lingering trace of danger that remained. Something had happened, but he couldn't figure out what it was.

At this moment, the thuds of heavy footsteps sounded in the corridor. Senma appeared at the third floor of the laboratory, saying to Richard, "Master wants to see you, follow me."

Richard nodded his head, and instructed the two assistants to keep the runes that he had just crafted before following Senma outside. Senma's face was still ashen, and the aura that emanated from her was rather weak. She took out an exquisite vial and tossed it to Richard, "Drink this along the way, you don't have much time left."

Richard was rather stupefied as he looked at the invigorating potion in his hands. This potion was designed to restore both energy and mana at the same time, something much more valuable than a regular revitalising potion. Something big had to have happened for him to be given this, but instead of asking he drank it all in one gulp before following her to the main castle.

Richard once again saw Gaton in the command room, and the magical map in the centre already had its contents changed. The

plane was unknown to Richard, but the area was steeped with magma. This plane was most likely to be a level of hell, or the deep abyss. Or perhaps it was another place with similar properties.

Gaton's hands were pressed on the edges of the map as he stared fixedly at the projection. A powerful aura was continuously emanating from his body, so thick it was almost visible to the naked eye.

On the end of the map was a pair of knights dressed in heavy armour. There were no exposed areas other than 'T' openings on their helmets, with even their palms covered in scale mail. Their armour was frighteningly heavy, and if one looked from the side they could see that it was over fifteen centimetres thick. It was unknown just how much power one needed to pierce through such dense armour.

The two knights looked the same, dressed in black stinger sets which were the most popular among heavy knights. However, the Archeron emblem was embedded on different sides for them, one on the left and the other on the right, to differentiate between the two.

This was Kaylen and Kayde, a pair of brother-sister twins that belonged to Gaton's thirteen. Although their equipment was ordinary and seemed not to have any additional effects, their auras were no lower than Senma's.

Mordred stood quietly behind Gaton, and when he saw Richard enter, his lips cracked open into a silent smile as a form of welcome.

Gaton stood up straight, and looked at Richard with his hawk-like eyes. "Richard, you're here. Let me see how much magic you have recovered. Hmm... Yup, a good deal of it. You'll be ready by the time the ceremony starts. Senma! Take another invigoration potion for use on the journey later."

Senma responded with a noise from her throat, as Richard looked

in bewilderment, “What ceremony?”

“An offering to the Eternal Dragon! Kiddo, your luck isn’t too bad. We have enough tributes now. But then, your luck can be said to be very bad as well, because there isn’t much time for you to prepare. Take this!” Soon, Gaton tossed a black box over to Richard.

The moment Richard caught the box, both of his hands sunk down, causing him to nearly fall to the ground. This box was close to a hundred kilograms heavy, and he had to activate Eruption to regain his balance and catch it firmly.

“Open it and look inside!”

Richard opened the box, and a burning stench wafted out from within. Shockingly, this stench had an overwhelming surge of power! There was a mass of flesh in the box, blazed so much it had turned black. The power of laws circled it, releasing a powerful aura to the pulse of its beating.

“Demon heart!” Richard said, aghast.

“Mm, from a lesser demon lord! And this too, catch!” Gaton tossed a larger box over this time. This box was extremely heavy too, but the moment it reached Richard it stopped on its own, before floating down and resting gently on the ground, as if there were a pair of invisible hands that had carried it. The moment Richard could see the box’s opening, the lid lifted.

There was an equally stinging stench here, but it wasn’t accompanied by any heat. This aura was thick with darkness and rot, the head of a devil with more than ten amber eyes open. The numerous horns on the head were still sharp and well-preserved. Even the arc of the horns were not changed, and everything seemed to come to a still, as if its appearance had been like this for a long time. This head was chopped off a long time ago, and no longer showed any signs of life. However, the powers of corrosion and darkness were still well preserved under the powers of magic.



“The head of a devil!” Richard gasped.

“It’s a greater devil! However, it has been dead for some time now, and it’s not that easy to sever the head of another devil. This is for you, the private property of your old man. You struck it big this time!” Gaton said as he put on the helmet he carried in his hands, as if he was going into a battle shortly.

Richard looked blankly at the two boxes, as his gaze swept past the people present. Kaylen and Kayde were masked, so he naturally couldn’t see their expressions, but both Mordred and Senma were just as shocked as him.

Richard’s abilities had recorded the data of these demon and devil remnants that were only spoken of in the books he had read. To humans, going to the deep abyss or hell to kill either a demon or a devil was extremely difficult. As for those devils and demons that had managed to traverse planes and enter Norland, they had long since been slain and offered to the Eternal Dragon. To look at these prized items that were still filled with power was not something common.

The demons were from the deep abyss, and the devils from hell. These were both prime planes just like Norland, but vastly larger. The environment there was extremely special, giving an abnormal boost to its residents’ powers. Each level of these places was a semi-plane unto itself, with a being unifying the area. As for the exact number of layers they had, nobody knew for sure. They were both an amalgamation of countless layers of planes.

# Book 1, Chapter 98 - The Road At Night

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It was said that the deepest trenches of the abyss and hell were linked, with countless demons and devils in the midst of an endless battle killing each other ceaselessly. This information had been procured from other races that humans had met while travelling the countless planes. Even that was but the tip of the iceberg, gathered from traces in songs of myth and legend.

The quintessential part of a demon was its heart, while the power of a devil came from its skull. Even a fragment of a devil's skull was extremely expensive in Norland, forget the complete one of a greater devil. Gaton spoke of it casually, but this devil's skull must have been one of the Archerons' greatest treasures. Only before that fresh lesser demon lord heart did the devil's skull lose some of its lustre.

At this moment, a handsome youth appeared in the common room, invisible to Richard until he showed his presence. It was the Odd Thief, Cyrden.

Cyrden smiled enchantingly, yet his voice sounded solemn, "Master, high priestess Ferlyn has already made preparations, and the ceremony can begin at any time. As for the other nobles, they have already discovered traces of our plans, and begun to amass experts along the road leading to the Church of the Eternal Dragon. I sense at least seventeen powerful experts, should I dispatch some of them first?"

Gaton was already in full armour by now. He tidied himself up, saying, "There's no need for that. I know we're outnumbered right now, but we can't wait for the rest to return. Let's set off now, where's my sword?"

Mordred placed an ancient sword in front of Gaton. It didn't look particularly remarkable, its copper scabbard already rusted. Apart from a few undecipherable runes on the blade, it looked just like

any other.

Gaton hung the sword at his waist before saying, “Let’s go. we’ll see if those old fogeys of the sixth level dare to strike! Richard, take the two boxes along with you. Remember to cast a floating spell on each of them or you won’t be able to move them.”

Moments later, a party of knights appeared at the teleportation temple, the road before them leading to the church. They trudged upwards on the winding path, the tall and magnificent trees littering the path gleaming with the brilliance of the Rainbow of the Moons as they cast large shadows on the ground.

The church was only a few kilometres from the teleportation temple. From leaving the sight of the temple’s guards, there were only two bends and a kilometre’s straight walk before they reached the church. However, that night this small distance seemed neverending.

The party was formed of six of the thirteen knights, with Gaton leading at the front. The horse he rode was clad in black armour, its footsteps occasionally sending out a burst of flames. This was Darkmoon Ember, a trademark of Gaton’s that was the nightmare of many nobles of the Alliance. Richard himself was guarded by the twins Kaylen and Kayde, with Senma right behind him. Mordred brought up the rear, guarding their backs. Lava was different from Gaton’s horse, its hooves stomping the floor restlessly, as if impatient at the unhurried pace of the party.

Richard was sat on an armoured horse, and the two boxes, one large and one small, were hung behind him without any concealment or disguise. His heart was beating irregularly, as he felt multiple icy spiritual forces scanning his body as well as the two boxes. Many pairs of hawk eyes were looking over at their party from deep in the forest, with quite a few bearing news to the outside world.

Up above in the distance, the Church of the Eternal Dragon was

shrouded in a glow of golden light, as if a palace of the gods. It stood tall in the sky, vanquishing the rainbow light of the moons to leave behind only a faint silhouette of an hourglass, with many layers of mysterious and obscure runes encircling it. This miraculous sight was a sign of the Church of the Eternal Dragon preparing to host the highest form of sacrificial ceremony.

There were three grades of ceremonious sacrifice to the Eternal Dragon, with the highest requiring the participation of many priests and clerics. It would give the offerer tremendous amounts of blessings, and rumour had it that one could get a chance to talk directly to the Eternal Dragon itself. However, not even the imperial family had managed to do that.

Or perhaps someone had done so once, keeping it a secret afterwards.

The grade of the sacrificial ceremony was dependent on the sacrificer and the offerings. However, a higher grade of ceremony did not necessarily mean better rewards. If one tried a greater ceremony without the offerings to match, they would not receive the blessings of the god. This had already happened once before in Faust, so looking at this odd party and the phenomenon on top of the mountain even an idiot would realise they had goods which could carry them through the highest grade of ceremony.

The value of these goods could drive a third of the fourteen nobles of Faust crazy, especially those who were ranked towards the back. Even including the imperial family and the top five noble houses, there wasn't a guarantee of such a ceremony being held every year in Faust despite the number of ceremonies performed in general. The Archerons had already demonstrated their prowess by taking over the third island of the seventh layer, but barely over a year in that position the general evaluation of them was still low. This upstart family had yet to stand firm on its two feet, but already wanted to perform the highest grade of sacrificial ceremony! Even if there weren't any direct conflicts of interest,

this had brought upon the Archerons the unrest and annoyance of the aristocrats. Furthermore, a sacrificial ceremony of the highest grade could very well affect the current balance of power in Faust.

Hence, this one kilometre stretch felt neverending, and the current situation was as tense as a pulled bowstring. It could be further tightened, or released immediately in the next moment.

Richard's palms were soaked with cold sweat, the killing intent around him suffocating. It was only now that he could truly feel the pressure brought by power. It was a natural suppression due to a difference in strength, making him feel as powerless as the first humans to discover the endless planes. This had nothing to do with courage at all.

'Calm down, and stay even more calm...' Richard reiterated these words in his heart, maintaining his posture while riding the horse. He did not dare cast any magic. In such a precarious balance, any unnecessary actions could tip the scales of the current situation.

With a crashing noise, the sounding of snapping twigs suddenly sounded in the nearby trees. Immediately after, Richard felt a black-garbed figure slowly advancing towards his party. His body tensed immediately. Each time his senses alerted him of the approaching figure, the pressure that was threatening him grew. How could such a skilled expert tread across tree branches but not conceal himself in such a dark night? This was a probe, and a provocation. If not handled properly, their party would very well be facing an all-around attack.

Gaton seemed not to have discovered anything, his expression relaxed. He had even begun humming a rhyme of a distant, unknown plane. The notes were light and merry, even mixed in with some high and low pitches. Ember trotted along happily as well, its hooves matching the upbeat rhythm of Gaton's humming. That somehow began to unravel the tension Richard was feeling.

The dark figure gradually got closer, and it seemed to be stuck

close to the ground. It was like a creeping leopard, able to launch a fatal attack at any moment. He had already left the camouflage of the forestry, and now had a large shadow projected on the ground. Under the eyes of everyone present, this figure pressed on closer. Six metres, five, four... When Gaton was about to pass it by, they were just one metre apart.

At such a distance, the black figure need not advance any longer. With just an outstretched hand it could attack Gaton at any moment, and a number of fatal points on Gaton's body were exposed. Darkmoon Ember's flank, its limbs, Gaton's thighs and ankle, even his waist was blatantly exposed! Richard, who was several metres behind, could clearly see that the black figure shuddered ever so slightly, and the body swelled with power, ready to launch a killing blow.

However, Gaton passed him by, and his attacks were never unleashed.

# Book 1, Chapter 99 - Ceremony

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The next to meet the dark figure were the pair of twins, Kaylen and Kayde, with Richard in between them. Kaylen was on his right, and the dark figure stood right in her way. However, she was the same as Gaton, seemingly unaware of the existence before her as she continued to ride at an unhurried pace. Her mount's metal hooves were raised in the next moment, preparing to stomp the ground. A flicker of flames unusually appeared at the bottom when the front two hooves were raised. It seemed like Kaylen had a strength rune attached to the hooves, and if this stomp hit its target they would suffer the equivalent of an all out attack from her!

The black figure did not dare act recklessly, but this knight under Gaton did not fear anything in her path! The figure hesitated for a moment, but chose to duck in a lightning-quick manner when the hooves stomped down before disappearing into the darkness. He had not dared to strike after all, and could only choose to retreat. After the dark figure left, Richard suddenly felt that the forestry on the sides of the road seemed much quieter.

The party advanced for another hundred metres, before rapid thuds of hooves were heard. A squad of imperial knights approached them, and when their leader saw Gaton from afar, he immediately raised his voice, "Marquis Gaton! By decree of His Imperial Majesty, we are to escort you to the Church of the Eternal Dragon for the sacrificial ceremony!"

When the imperial knights appeared, Richard knew that he was now safe. However, he knew that he could not have avoided walking through the stretch of road earlier. If they hadn't relied on their own strength to make it this far, they would never have seen this squad of knights.

Both parties exchanged greetings, before getting off horseback. They chose to walk the remaining distance, in a show of their

reverence for the Dragon of Eternity and Light.

Two rows of young and beautiful girls from the church were stood before the gates. The faint gold high-collared robes added an elegant and pure look to them, making them all the more captivating. These were members of the Church of the Eternal Dragon. As they gained more blessings from the Dragon, they would become clerics, then shamans, then priestesses, before eventually becoming high priestesses in charge of their own church. It was no secret that the Eternal Dragon favoured girls.

The imperial knights stopped in front of the gate, while the Archeron party continued moving forward. In this party of armour-clad knights, Richard who wore mage robes and carried two boxes of differing sizes was extremely catching to the eye.

The gates of the church were a towering twenty metres tall, and when they entered Richard's vision suddenly blurred before he found himself in a desert. This was an endless desert plain, as if the concept of a horizon did not exist. The skies seemed to connect to the earth, yet some mysterious powers had grounded the sand into powder which littered the air. Several sand dunes close by had broken stone pillars, evidence of the passage of time. From the outside, the Church of the Eternal Dragon was just a square kilometre in size, but within it Richard couldn't tell the area of this desert even with Precision.

At the centre of his vision were traces of the church, only that half of it had already crumbled. The tall granite walls and few remaining pillars could allow one to guess the magnificent glory of the church in its heyday.

At the centre of all this was a broken stone platform. It was where the sacrifice would be offered, and the ceremony would take place.

Several threads of light were flowing in from the corners of the desert, forming a huge hourglass in front of the party. Once fully



formed the hourglass shattered, to reveal a woman that exuded a divine and dignified aura. She was wearing sacred white robes, with a triple crown resting on her head. In her hands was a faint golden sceptre, while mysterious golden runes that evoked an archaic feeling filled the robes and crown.

Gaton stepped forward, bowing as he paid his greetings, “Exalted High Priestess Ferlyn, this is my son Richard. He will be the one performing the sacrifice this time.

Ferlyn smiled and nodded her head. This smile of hers was beautiful and gentle, yet it was also distant and faint, surpassing the existence of humans, overlooking on all life.

The high priestess looked at Richard and smiled, “Fortunate child, I hope that your sincerity will allow the Supreme Dragon of Eternity and Light to be satisfied with your offerings. The sacrificial ceremony has been prepared, I will wait for you at the altar. After you have made your preparations, you can come by my side and begin the ceremony.” After finishing, the high priestess walked on a faint golden road made of light towards the altar.

“Preparations?” Although Richard had tried his best to understand the process of a sacrificial ceremony, he did not know what he needed apart from the offerings.

Gaton chuckled and patted him on the shoulder with vigour. “There’s nothing much to prepare. Even if it’s the same offerings, different people will receive different blessings. So kiddo, everything depends on your luck. Ah right! There is something I’d forgotten to tell you. Because the Archerons have our own floating island, the Eternal Dragon will ask how you want to allocate the blessings between your family and yourself. Remember to keep it all. Alright then, go on kiddo! Good luck!”

And thus, albeit with some difficulty, Richard dragged the two boxes towards the altar in the middle of the desert. Although he’d used a floating spell on them, these organs weren’t light at all.

Finding his spot, Richard couldn't help but look around. Only standing right in front of the altar could one truly feel the archaic grandeur that had withstood the erosion of time. There seemed to be no beginning nor end, and no matter how extravagant something was, it would perish with time passing by, turning it into something for future generations to lament. But why did they not want to rebuild this place?

As if reading Richard's doubts, Ferlyn said gently, "Child, any true church of the Eternal Dragon is rubble like this, and can never be repaired. Even if we built a magnificent church here with the greatest of spell formations, when a ceremony begins it will all be reduced to rubble in the river of time. Not even gods can withstand the sands of time, so the scene you see before you is the same one that has existed throughout the eons."

"Thank you for your teachings." Richard's heart skipped a beat, as if comprehending something from her words. He bowed slightly, like he would towards the teachers in the Deepblue, before asking, "What should I do now?"

"Firstly, prepare your offerings." Ferlyn ordered. After watching Richard open the two boxes, even she with her indifference was still slightly moved, "The head of a greater devil? What a rare offering. This... it's actually the heart of a lesser demon lord! What a lucky child! Let us begin the ceremony, then, the heart cannot be out here much longer."

Ferlyn clasped her hands before her chest, as she lowered her head towards the altar. She began to chant a mysterious and obscure incantation with varying notes. As she spoke each syllable, the endless skies began to be filled with traces of golden scriptures, like a rain of gold. A mysterious and ancient aura emerged from the void and began spreading through the area. Very soon the skies turned dark, and finally they were devoid of all colour.

Transcending the voidless sands of time, a new universe gradually appeared, with light and life of its own. Countless

brilliant stars began to travel their paths, sucking Richard's soul in. He'd been trying to decipher the meaning behind all the runes, but now he felt his bloodline racing quickly. This was not the fervour and rage he felt during the awakening of his bloodline, but a thirst for the source of life and belonging.

As the incantation reached its climax, Ferlyn's voice had grown extremely shrill, as if she was a dragon singing in the sky. She touched the altar with the sceptre in her hands, causing the broken stone platform to radiate golden light, forming a pillar of light that penetrated the skies. The pillar began to expand, beginning to cover the entirety of the ruins, with undecipherable scriptures glowing and fading seamlessly on its surface. As for the skies, they were filled with the cries of a dragon, as well as the whistling of the desert wind.

An incomparably mighty aura descended, and high priestess Ferlyn retreated from the borders of the light pillar. Richard was left alone on the altar, and from that moment on the people outside would not be able to look within.

# Book 1, Chapter 100 - Ceremony

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Ferlyn's sceptre stopped moving, and she disappeared from her position to reappear beside Gaton. She smiled, "Marquis Gaton, I'd never thought you would have brought such great offerings this time. The blessings I receive will increase significantly as well. However, while this child will undoubtedly become a runemaster in the future. That level of offerings... it seems to be a waste. I hear the enemies of the Archerons are still aplenty, and equally strong."

Gaton inhaled deeply before saying, "This is what he deserves, and very soon he will be sent to a different plane. If he can get more blessings, then so it shall be. As for our enemies, ha! They can come if they want to, I'll teach them regret."

The high priestess Ferlyn nodded her head and spoke elegantly, "Then we shall see the results of this child's blessings, and pray that the gifts will be related to the sands of time..."

An inconceivably massive conscient had already enveloped Richard in that pillar of light, pulling his consciousness back from the void. Back to his senses, the boy was shocked to find that he was now a regular human, just like any other. His mana was sealed, and so was his bloodline. Realising the ceremony had already begun, he immediately lifted the devil skull from the larger chest and painstakingly placed it on the altar.

Brilliant light was formed as soon as the skull made contact with the altar, turning into another pillar that charged up into the skies. The skull gradually turned transparent in the light, before innumerable runic scriptures appeared from within. They then converged, disappearing into the void. It seemed as if the altar was set ablaze, as the countless scriptures turned into golden butterflies that fluttered towards the distant stars. As for the skull itself, it had disintegrated into nothingness.

A ray of light appeared from the void, shining directly onto

Richard. It soon turned into a cocoon of light, manifesting those countless runes within. Richard heaved a sigh of relief. The appearance of the light cocoon indicated that the Eternal Dragon was satisfied with the offering. At the very least, he would not receive any divine punishment. However, there was no need for worries right from the start. Under usual circumstances, a greater devil's skull was enough to conduct the highest grade of sacrificial ceremony.

Although it was extremely difficult to grasp the different forms of the light cocoon, Richard still tried to observe it. All of his knowledge before this came from books or libraries, and to witness something like this up front gave him a greater understanding that would benefit him greatly as he tried to learn the laws of the worlds in the future.

Every scene, every rune, represented a certain type of divine blessing. For example, a rune shaped like armour would indicate a chance to get more powerful equipment. Crystals and gems would yield rare resources. What these runes manifested into now would be determined by the degree of the blessing received.

Of course, the most precious of all was the emblem of the Church of the Eternal Dragon, the hourglass. Any blessing which touched upon the sands of time would be incomparably powerful. The time the blessing took to manifest determined its power, and from what the numbers in Richard's vision told him, the blessings were random with no set rules.

The light cocoon abruptly split open and formed an hourglass, and a large one at that! Richard's breathing halted for a moment, before he was overtaken by glee. Golden beads of sand flowed within the hourglass, the sands of time itself.

The gargantuan will enveloped him once again—the first stage of the ceremony had ended. Richard suppressed his glee, before using copious amounts of effort to place the demon's heart on the altar. Without any of his powers, it was no easy feat to lift this thing that

weighed over a hundred kilograms. If not for him being force-fed his way into a strong, healthy, body, he wouldn't even have been able to move this heart.

Very soon, Richard looked at the altar with anticipation. The offerings made to the Dragon of Eternity and Light all possessed mighty power. They could be fragments of divine weapons, or even whole gems. Items that came from foreign planes would receive even more blessings than those from Norland. The more powerful the offering, the more the blessings. Thus, just based on the ranks of power, the demon lord's heart was much more precious than the devil skull.

The altar trembled as the heart was placed upon it, before coming to a stop. Once more, Richard unknowingly held his breath.

A low sigh suddenly rang out, in the raspy voice of a dragon. Blinding golden light seeped out from every corner of the altar, forming several dozen torrents of gold before piercing the demon heart. The heart writhed violently, and an ear-piercing wail actually came from within. Very soon, it floated in midair together with the torrents of golden light. More light appeared above the altar from the void, once again boring into the heart from all directions. The heart gradually turned transparent, and the light gold of runic scriptures appeared and rose into the skies once again.

However, this scripture still had strands of golden light connecting to the heart, causing it to beat ten times faster than it was. Each pulse pulled some of the runes back, but with the passage of time more left than returned. Eventually the runes began to break apart, forming golden butterflies that soared into the void.

The process of digesting the demon's heart was evidently much slower than that for the devil's head. A little under half remained even after ten minutes, and by then the light of blessing appeared

once again in the void.

This time, the light cocoon did not transform much before adopting the form of an hourglass. However, the glow did not cease. This cocoon was much brighter and more powerful than the one before, causing Richard to divert his gaze after a while as he was left unable to look on. As the pillar of light continued to shine, the ball of light turned even brighter.

The demon heart finally disintegrated, leaving two hourglasses floating atop the altar. The piercing brilliance of the powerful light subsided, revealing a ball of pure gold light.

Richard was shocked. That ball of light was not very rare in such a ceremony. It was an egg, one that could be opened to reveal powerful divine weapons or rare resources, which while valuable wasn't of much use.

At this moment, a bizarre, almighty, and emotionless voice rang in Richard's ears. "Mortal, how do you want to allocate the blessings amongst your family and yourself?"

Richard immediately recalled Gaton's words, but the happenings that occurred on his way here surfaced once again in heart.

Gaton and his rune knights had relied on their extraordinary might to repel their enemies in the darkness. Perhaps their enemies could have annihilated them, but the price to pay would be excruciatingly high. At the very least, the enemies at the forefront would accompany them in the afterlife. The Sacred Alliance was but a pile of scattered sand. They could not work together, fingers forming a palm to crush the enemies before them. Although the parties spying on the Archerons could not wait for their death, they did not want to sacrifice themselves to elevate the status of others. Back then, if the knights of the Archerons had not displayed such an impressive show of might, the wolves in the darkness would have lunged forward and devoured them.

Richard had read traces of the silvermoon elves' history from the

books in the family library and had some glimpses of the truth. He acknowledged that Gaton had his own considerations for the conquest of Evernight Forest. Regardless of what the actual truth of that expedition was, he had a sudden impulse.

It was now time to return some favours to the Archerons.

The almighty voice rang out again in his consciousness, “Mortal, how do you want to allocate the blessings amongst your family and yourself?”

Richard’s expression grew resolute, “Split them evenly.”

As soon as he made his reply, the two hourglasses shrank immediately to half their size, with no further changes to the ball of light. The voice rang out again, “Mortal, you may now receive your blessings.”



# Book 1, Chapter 101 - Ceremony

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Richard stood up and stretched his hands out to reach the three divine marks floating in the air. When his fingers came into contact with them, the mysterious power of the Eternal Dragon would take form as an appropriate blessing.

He first touched the hourglass formed by the devil skull. It cracked open, and the fine golden sand entered his body to form a complicated golden scripture that disappeared into him.

Richard felt a new mysterious force in his body, which filled his muscles with vigour. The meaning of the scripture surfaced in his consciousness: Divine blessing, Torrent of Life. In the next fifteen years, his body would not age.

This blessing was akin to prolonging one's life by fifteen years. Humans in Norland only naturally experienced this at two stages in their lives— when they entered the saint realm, and once they entered the legendary realm. Apart from these, the only other way to prolong one's life was through the blessings of the Eternal Dragon.

To prolong one's life was the desire of all intelligent creatures, so the blessings of the sands of time were the most valuable of all. It was needless to emphasize the importance of life. Even during struggles for power, in eras of dazzling stars and brilliant heroes, many a time the easiest victory was outliving your opponents.

Richard had never expected to receive such a blessing in his first ceremony. He suppressed his elation, and reached for the second divine mark.

The second hourglass broke as well, the beads of golden sand becoming a ray of light that entered his body in the form of a scripture. Once again, he was given knowledge of the blessing: Divine Blessing, Unhurriedness. When he entered a lesser plane in the future that did not possess a Church of the Eternal Dragon, the

timeflow there would jump to ten times Norland's time. This effect would last for thirty years, but would not affect Norland or a higher plane.

Thinking about it, this was truly a divine gift. With it, he could enter another plane and war for ten years, but only a single year would pass in Norland. Although the flow of time varied in the myriad of planes, the differences were normally quite small. Unhurriedness actually gave him tenfold the time! Of course, one would still spend their life force in that lesser plane. Staying there for thirty years would age their body correspondingly. Only in tandem with Torrent of Life could one proceed ceaselessly with planar wars.

Although the first two blessings did not provide him with any battle prowess, life and time were the greatest blessings for humans.

Richard could barely control his excitement and glee as he once again reaching for that ball of light. He was extremely curious as to this mysterious blessing, but he did not harbour much hope. Mathematics told him that his good luck so far would not affect the third try.

However, even if this ball of light did not reveal any precious blessings, Richard would not be disappointed. Because his luck had already been good enough until now. However, the ball of light had completely absorbed most of the demon's heart, so to claim that there were no expectations at all was impossible.

However, before Richard's left hand could touch the ball of light, a ray of light suddenly flitted past the string of beast ivory on his hand. The largest piece in the centre suddenly flashed, absorbing that ray of light. It seemed to be set ablaze immediately, radiating golden flames of time that burned Richard's hand in the process.

"ARGH!" Richard screamed, stumbling backwards as he waved his left hand continuously. Fortunately, while the timeflames were

violent they were extinguished in the very next moment.

He took the ivory bracelet off his hand, discovering a deep scar in the shape of that ivory upon it. The pain the timeflames inflicted upon him was different from that of regular fire. Although it hurt terribly in that moment and he'd been scarred by it, the pain disappeared almost immediately. Richard moved his left hand, but could not feel anything amiss. He looked at the bracelet again, and it seemed to be as good as new with no traces of being damaged. Richard heaved a sigh of relief, not knowing why he had favoured this bracelet so heavily. It might have been because of Mountainsea's barbaric farewell hug, or the words that she had said.

He put on the bracelet once again, wanting to continue on with the ceremony, but was interrupted. The almighty aura descended upon the altar once more, this time even more dominating than before. When the ancient and distant aura flashed past Richard, he felt the birth and destruction of the endless planes through the eons of time.

This overpowered existence filled Richard's soul immediately, and his body no longer heeded his own will as he slowly knelt before the altar.

"Mortal..." Once again, the mighty voice rang in Richard's consciousness. However, this time it wasn't a robotic cold voice, but an ancient one that commanded utmost reverence.

Richard suddenly trembled and understood that this was no longer a thread of divine power which would illicit automatic responses, but the direct conscient of the Dragon of Eternity and Light itself!

He was momentarily stunned. It was simply indescribable to have a direct audience with the Dragon of Eternity and Light, that was sovereign even of the higher planes.

At this moment, outside of the light pillar, Gaton stared at a

golden hourglass in his hands, his face filled with disbelief. This small hourglass was made of translucent crystal, the fine golden sand within it trickling down continuously regardless of the angle it was held at. There was a total of ten such hourglasses, and when put together they weren't larger than Gaton's palms. The important thing was that they weren't simple decorative ornaments, but formed from the divine energy of the Eternal Dragon. Anyone who broke them would obtain blessings.

Just one minute ago, ten streaks of light were shot out from within the pillar, forming these miniature hourglasses that fell freely to the ground. This incident happened too suddenly, and even with Gaton's physical prowess he was caught unprepared, almost allowing two of the hourglasses to fall to the ground. Fortunately, high priestess Ferlyn had waved her hands and two rays of light caught them before sending them to his hands.

"This is..." Gaton stared at the hourglasses in his hand, stupefied.

Ferlyn looked at the hourglasses and understood the situation. She said, "This is the blessings that the Eternal Dragon has given to the Archerons, with each hourglass blessed with Torrent of Life. Whichever Archeron opens these hourglasses will be given three to five years of life force."

Ferlyn smiled, "You have a good son, Marquis Gaton." She had heard Gaton's instructions to Richard before the ceremony. There was nothing secret to her within the church's bounds.

It was simply unfathomable to be willing to allocate such a massive blessing to his family. Ferlyn had presided over many ceremonies, and it was extremely rare for a family to allocate them to one individual. On the other hand, it was unheard of for an individual to allocate the blessings to their family.

Gaton raised his head and looked at the light pillar. He could not see anything within, and only smiled wryly, not saying anything.

Ferlyn noted the expression that Gaton put on, seemingly in

thought. Her eyelashes suddenly fluttered, which gave this revered high priestess a tinge of humanity. She then reminded Gaton, “Marquis, the blessings that were granted to the Archeron Family far exceeded these ten hourglasses. You had better look at the situation of your floating island.”

Gaton received another shock, as he raised his hand in a gesture. Senma left the church grounds immediately, and returned within a minute. Although her voice was suppressed, the slight trembling was still evident. “Master! Our floating island is absorbing the elemental energy of the void! The perimeter has grown by fifty metres, and it’s still expanding. Furthermore, the trajectory of the islands is shifting. As per my judgement, we’ll soon swap places with the second island!”

After hearing this shocking news, Gaton did not seem happy. Instead, he squinted and muttered, “This smelly brat!”

# Book 1, Chapter 102 - Seed of Destiny

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There were two ways for the families in Faust to improve their position. The first was direct conflict, while the other was what was currently happening to the Archerons— to have luck so supreme that they would receive blessings from the gods. The expansion of the island here was secondary; what was more important was that it proved the family had the grace of the Eternal Dragon for a while, at least for the next year and at most for the next three. To launch a frontal assault on such a family in Faust would likely result in dire consequences, such as a drop in blessings received by the attacking family themselves.

However, there were very few families who have actually done this throughout the history of Faust, one of the contributing factors being the randomness and unpredictability of such grace from the gods. Besides, without the strength to make such rankings foundational, it would all be false glory. Barely achieving such a ranking would not ensure that the family could maintain it for a long time to come. Unless the family has already made sufficient preparations to climb through the hierarchy, it would be futile to try their luck. For example, the islands on the seventh layer did not have any magic defense, while there was divine magic protecting the islands in the sixth.

This was not the first time Gaton had offered a sacrifice. For the island to change orbits required luck, yes, but it had to come from the blessings of the sacrifice. Unfortunately, it seemed like Richard had left half of the blessings given to him to the Archerons.

Suddenly, before he could utter a word, Gaton turned pale. High priestess Ferlyn also revealed shock from the side, the hands holding onto her sceptre beginning to tremble uncontrollably.

“This is...” Gaton was dumbstruck. He immediately looked towards high priestess Ferlyn, expecting her to have been her usual calm and elegant self. Yet, what greeted him was an unrestrained

look of astonishment, ecstasy and bubbling reverence.

Mordred, though late by a moment, had the same change of expression. He looked up into the endless sky above the church, where an indescribably enormous conscient was slowly descending.

Outside of that, everything was peaceful and serene. Be it the rest of Gaton's knights or the other members of the clergy further out, none of them were aware of the events at all. The only thing they realised was the peculiar behaviour of their master, which earned various stares.

High priestess Ferlyn tried her best to maintain a calm expression, though her voice did not stop trembling. In a low, almost mumble, she said, "This is the main conscient of the Eternal Dragon, a true miracle! This is impossible, it was merely the heart of a lesser demon lord, how did it draw the descent of the conscient of the mighty Eternal Dragon?"

Suddenly, she turned to stare at Gaton, eyes shining like stars. "Marquis! What other offerings did you prepare?"

Though shocked upon hearing that this was the main conscient of the Eternal Dragon, Gaton was able to relax, loosening his taut nerves. Smiling bitterly, he shrugged, "Those two are all I offered. This is the Church of the Eternal Dragon; how can I keep any secrets from you?"

The dazzling shine from the eyes of high priestess Ferlyn started to dim. Without saying anything more, she gazed at the pillar of light with incredible zeal, conviction, and sincerity. It was a pity that even she could not see through the screen formed from the strength of the Eternal Dragon. Even her superior status did not grant her the right to disrupt a ceremony that did not belong to her.

All of a sudden, high priestess Ferlyn leaned her head towards Gaton. In a deliberately hushed voice, she whispered, "Marquis

Sir, I recall you saying that Richard will be going on an expedition to the numerous planes very soon?”

“That’s right, I have already prepared a suitable secondary plane marking for him; I’ve already established a foothold there,” Gaton replied.

“I have an apprentice, a level 8 cleric named Flowsand. I hope you can give her a spot on Richard’s core team.”

With a stern expression, Gaton asked, “The same one who received the title of ‘Daybreak’?”

Ferlyn nodded, “That’s her.”

Titles were not self-conferred in the Church, instead granted by the Eternal Dragon after one received enough blessings. Only two officials of the Church in Faust had been conferred such a title, Ferlyn the First Light of Dawn, and Flowsand Daybreak.

Muttering to himself, Gaton nodded repeatedly while signalling agreement. “Sure!”

High priestess Ferlyn laughed, the divine beauty immediately lighting up everything before everyone’s eyes. Reaching out her arm, she placed it on Gaton’s chest, promising, “Marquis, if you fulfil this promise, you shall have the highest level of friendship from me for ten years.”

Gaton grinned along. The effects of Ferlyn’s friendship on the Archerons, even if only personal, was a valuable asset in Faust that would have clear effects. The time limit was just something any priest of the Eternal Dragon would impose on anything; it was their way of expressing their faith.

Ferlyn added, “Richard hasn’t chosen his followers yet, has he? What about his soulguard? Any candidates?”

“There were a few suitable candidates from our death camp recently. He will choose for himself when the time comes. But yes, there aren’t enough followers in his core team,” Gaton explained.



High priestess Ferlyn smiled meaningfully. “I heard that the batch arriving at Mokoff Port next week is pretty good. Morfan, the portmaster there, still owes me some favours.”

“I understand,” Gaton responded with a nod...

At that moment, Richard who was within the screen was indescribably shocked, unable to recover the autonomy of his body. The will and soul he'd thought of as firm were actually tottering with the ripples of time, threatening to collapse and dissipate at any moment. This was no intentional attack, just an aftereffect of the descent of the Eternal Dragon. However, the dragon's will was far too powerful. Even if it had slowed its descent, it still gave rise to tsunami-like waves of time.

“Mortal...” The voice of the Eternal Dragon rang once again in Richard's soul. This time, the formidable existence only let a strand of consciousness into the range of the altar, and the strength of the soul's echo was halved. The first time it called out, Richard's soul was nearly destroyed.

“What can I do for you, mighty Eternal Dragon?” Richard responded through clenched teeth, barely clinging on to his unstable consciousness.

“Mortal, I see offerings from you that please me. Put them on the altar, and you shall have a title and blessings.”

Offerings? Richard was stumped for words: he'd given all the offerings already... Unless— he suddenly got an idea. He glanced at the ivory on the bracelet around his left wrist; it was radiating pale gold light, the power of time. This gift from Mountainsea was what had attracted the central will of the Eternal Dragon!

Richard's thoughts immediately went over to the barbarian girl. Someone with hugs as heavy as mountains, with the greatest of backgrounds and most incredible wealth, but who'd never taken it all to heart... He did not hesitate for long.

“Almighty Eternal Dragon, forgive me for my impudence. This bracelet is a gift from my friend; I’m afraid I cannot offer it to you.” It was difficult to say this, but Richard was firm.

“Mortal, all that you treasure now will eventually turn into nothingness.”

“But it is what I treasure now, having it now is sufficient for me!”

The conscient of the Eternal Dragon appeared to have been shaken, though it rang again in Richard’s consciousness afterwards, “Mortal, if you ever change your mind after today, you may offer sacrifice to me in any of my churches.”

Soon after, the indescribable conscient gently faded, leaving Richard gasping desperately for air. He laid paralyzed on the ground, so weak he barely had strength to move his finger. As the gigantic conscient slowly rose above, he could almost feel his soul being lifted and drawn out of his body. However, he did see that as the main conscient of the Eternal Dragon left, there seemed to be a few specks of light dropping from overhead, blending into the time sphere that was still floating in the sky above the altar. Suddenly, a ripple of violently strong life force burst out of the time sphere

After catching his breath, Richard managed to stand and walk towards the time sphere, albeit with much difficulty. This was the biggest prize, though he had no idea what was inside. However, no matter what it used to hold, Richard completely did not have any expectations after rejecting the request of the Eternal Dragon. He reached out to touch the time sphere, causing a burst of strong light. A dark green egg appeared on his palm soon after, radiating a strong life force that could be felt even on the outside.

Upon receiving the strange egg, Richard only got a short message in his mind. In fact, it was so short there was only a word, “Seed.”

Seed? What seed?

While Richard was left confused, the brilliance of the altar had

already faded. Once again it became an abandoned stone tower that was corroded by the sand and winds. The screen of time also slowly scattered into nothing.

As Richard stood dazely in front of the altar, carrying the ‘seed’ in his hands, high priestess Ferlyn had already cried out in alarm, “HOW IS IT A SEED?!”

“Seed? What is that?” A glimmer flickered in Gaton’s eyes; though he had no idea what the seed was, he could tell from Ferlyn’s terrible complexion that it was definitely something unusual.

With a complicated expression, high priestess Ferlyn started to explain slowly, “It is formally called the seed, but in private we refer to it as the seed of destiny and destruction. It is a blessing that is hard to describe; its specific purpose is one of the most classified information of the Church, that must never be leaked. It is both good and bad news that Richard was conferred the seed. On the good side, he will be able to give his enemies in the myriad planes a huge surprise. However, his journey out must be brought forward. We cannot let the seed take root in Norland, it has to enter another plane within a month. This request... You can take it to be a divine command from the Eternal Dragon himself.”

Grimacing, Gaton grabbed Richard’s shoulder and pulled him by his side. Frowning, he asked, “Just one month?”

“At most a month. The earlier he goes, the less damage there is to his sacred blessings.” Ferlyn was firm with her decision.

“What about Flowsand?” Gaton tried to sound Ferlyn out from another direction.

“Of course she will follow along.”

# Book 1, Chapter 103 - Preparations

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What is this seed? Richard could not obtain any more information no matter how hard he looked at the dark green egg. The only hint he'd received from the Eternal Dragon was that it was a seed, and none of his detection spells gave him any further information.

Before he left the Church of the Eternal Dragon, high priestess Ferlyn stopped him to have a word. She mentioned her travels to other churches on the continent when she was young. During these practice years, she'd once read an extract from an epic written before recorded history. It praised a king who held a very hideous weapon. He treasured the supreme weapon at all costs, keeping it with him everywhere he went as he protected and improved its abilities at all costs.

Richard thanked high priestess Ferlyn sincerely despite the vagueness of the information she'd given him. It was evidently a hint to the use of the seed, telling him of its importance and the amount of resources he'd have to give it in the future. The sharp boy also noticed little wrinkles appearing at the ends of her eyes after she spoke to him, making her look a few years older. She'd looked exceptionally bright right after the ceremony had ended!

This was immediate evidence that Ferlyn lost some grace. The priestess hosting the ceremony normally gained the grace of the Eternal Dragon, but just this bit of cryptic information had actually lost her far more than she'd earned even from a ceremony of this magnitude. Just that explained the importance of the seed.

That was why Richard bowed to Ferlyn sincerely before leaving the Church of the Eternal Dragon, saying earnestly, "Thank you for your guidance!"

Ferlyn smiled and gently tapped Richard's shoulders with the sceptre in her hands, "Richard, don't show any mercy. Destroying

every enemy before you will be the best way to show your gratitude.”

Richard nodded seriously, standing up straight with a stern look on his young face. He’d experienced countless unforeseen events over the past few days, and the trials of life and death had instilled an aura in him that did not match his age.

Gaton patted Richard’s shoulder, “Let’s go kid, you don’t have much time. You need to pack up tonight, making a move tomorrow morning. We’ll talk about everything along the way... Ah, right, take care of that seed in your hands. Don’t let it get too far from you.”

They left the church the same way they’d arrived, with Gaton in the lead and Kaylen and Kayde guarding Richard. Senma and Mordred were at the back.

As they followed the route down from the church, they could see the still-expanding Archeron island switching positions with its neighbour. The second island of the seventh layer was filled with shouts, countless lights shooting up around it as those living on its edge teleported away from the crumbling buildings. The rocks on the outer rim just split off, falling down into the clouds. The foundations of the buildings collapsed, and they slowly tilted before falling down themselves.

These islands were three kilometres up in the sky. Without a powerful ability or spell for flight, any living being would die immediately if they fell from such a height. All the plants, vegetation, and rocks immediately disappeared into the clouds. However, the buildings and living things that came later? They fell.

At that moment, countless eyes were fixated on that stunning scene. From the other islands, from Faust, even from elsewhere in the continent this incident had drawn attention.

Gaton pointed at those two shifting floating islands, saying, “Do

you see it? Kiddo, this is the result of the arrangement you made. It doesn't matter whether our floating island shifts forward or backwards, that is just false reputation. If I wanted to move up further, I would have continued my conquest. If you really want to return the favour of the Archerons, then survive the planar wars. Only after you've accomplished yourself and reached my age should you talk about giving back to the family!"

Richard hugged the seed and nodded silently. He had a lot on his mind now, and was clueless on how to handle his relationship with Gaton and the other Archerons. He thus decided to face the situation calmly and rationally.

Once they got to their island, a butler moved to pack Richard's luggage. The children of the family had gotten wind of Richard's departure, so they came over to send him off. Demi, Venica, and Wennington were amongst them as expected, but all of them were there to demand their runes. However, their motives weren't exactly the same.

Demi especially looked like she wouldn't let Richard off easy. She'd arrived just as Wennington was about to leave, forcing Richard to promise to complete her rune before she left in a huff. Once she left, the butler came to inform Richard that Gaton was waiting for him.

The meeting point this time was Gaton's study. The room wasn't big, with shelves resting against the wall storing maps that were painted out on magic paper. There were a handful of history and philosophy books, with many more being about battle techniques and the art of war. There were about ten-odd books about cultural history, but all of it seemed to be about silvermoon elves. On the wall behind Gaton was a map of the Norland continent, along with maps of three other planes.

Thus, Richard didn't sense any cultured or scholarly aura when he first walked into the room. He instead smelt a thick scent of blood and fire. Gaton was sat on the table, cleaning a magical

sword. He gestured to Richard to close the door behind him, muttering, “Kiddo, you have to start exploring other planes right away because of the seed. There’s a saying in planar wars, ‘Even the beasts of Norland are prettier than the elves of other planes.’ Every living thing, even the gods of life in the plane, will be your enemy the moment you step foot in there. Every. Single. Person. Kill your enemies first, before you consider any other problems. Be merciless and apathetic, and know that in most cases the best choice is to extinguish all your enemies. You will only be digging your grave with kindness.”

“I will not show any mercy,” Richard replied.

Gaton chuckled, “Don’t be too confident yet, kiddo. There is a huge difference between wars in Norland and planar wars. Even I wasn’t used to it. You’re going to be visiting a lesser plane that restricts the power of its inhabitants to about level 15 by our standards. I’ve already set up a base there, so you’ll have some guides when you enter. But don’t be startled if anything unexpected happens. It would be odd if there wasn’t any incident. You can never be prepared enough.”

# Book 1, Chapter 104 - Preparations

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“What kind of preparations should I make,” Richard asked, “I’ll also need a batch of magic ingredients to craft elementary runes.”

“That we have, but no more. Planar teleportation requires a large amount of magic crystals, and tunnels aren’t stable to a new plane so powerful magical objects might harm the connection. The plane you’re going to explore this time will only be a low-grade one, so your party will be more important than the gear. Most of our magic crystals will be allocated towards the teleportation.”

Richard nodded his head in understanding.

Gaton harrumphed, and then solemnly said, “Kiddo, you’re already grown up. There’s something I have to tell you. When you were younger, your mother performed an awakening ceremony with you, no?”

Richard’s heart skipped several beats. Pure instinct told him that the secrets of this ceremony could not be revealed to anyone. Having obtained the blessings of wisdom and truth from the Codex of Alucia, he felt a need to keep mum about it.

However, Gaton did not wait for his reply, “I heard that there was a small hiccup during the ceremony, one that will change your life from those of regular humans. Nightmare creatures are likely to disturb your life in the following years, appearing randomly with unknown numbers and strength. Dealing with them will be fairly simple: just blast them to shreds with your spells. Just remember that fire and ice aren’t very effective against them.” There seemed to be a twinge of regret in Gaton’s gaze.

“Remain vigilant, and constantly try to grow in power. Tomorrow will be the first stop of your journey, the death training camp of the Archeron Family. The commoners and slaves of the family are trained there, groomed into experts through the law of the jungle. Choose anyone you wish to be your soulguard, but pay



heed to the choice you make. I only have one soul contract with me, and normally the only way to obtain one is a blessing from the Eternal Dragon. Don't think of getting a second copy any time soon. Head to Mokoff Port afterwards, and find portmaster Morfan and tell him you're there to pick some slaves. He'll arrange everything for you, and you can choose the best suited warriors. Remember to pay attention to quality, not quantity."

Gaton seemed to realise he was growing long-winded, "Alright kiddo, do you have anything to tell me?"

Richard thought in earnest, but eventually shook his head. "Let's talk about it again when I return alive."

Just as Richard was about to leave, Gaton called out to him. "Right, I'd forgotten something! The first rule of the Archerons! Before you go to a different plane, you must choose a companion. At least one. And do it for your old man by today! As for packing your items, leave it to the housekeeper. Come, tell me, who do you want as your companion? Don't be shy, just say a name! Ah, that's right, as a spectator, I have a pretty good suggestion, want to hear it?"

"Who? Demi?" Richard asked. Amongst the teens that he had seen, Demi had the most potential.

"Of course it's not that lass! It's your cousin, Earl Alice." Gaton grinned.

"What?" Richard almost cried out.

In recent times, Alice had become a rising star amongst the Archerons, second only to Gaton. Having become an Earl only recently, her rank and feudal lands were second only to Gaton and Marquess Sauron.

Alice was different from Gaton who relied on his thirteen knights. She had overwhelming strategic might, and great command over the battlefield. There was unspoken agreement in

the family that she would exceed even Gaton if they had equal firepower.

Richard had met Alice once, when he'd been caught up in that conspiracy with Faulk. Beautiful with fiery red hair, her scars and the killing intent displayed with that giant sword had left a deep impression on him. Alice Archeron was a stormy blaze of a woman coupled with a pair of ice-cold eyes. If he were to describe her on instinct, she was ice wrapped by fire and lightning.

Nobody would even think of becoming the partner of such a god of war.

Richard smiled bitterly, "This... Earl Alice wouldn't agree to it, would she?"

"She will. Because she won't be able to find a better companion than you. If she doesn't agree, that's very easy too; just start an elders' conference! Okay, I'll partner you two up now! Your old man has the final say in the council anyway!" Gaton was brimming with confidence, but Richard felt like his father's smile held a trace of conspiracy.

"Hurry and choose someone for now, though. You can have more than one anyway, As for your elder cousin, we can put that aside, she has already returned to her land. I heard the place she just conquered is in turmoil. If only she'd waited two more days to return!" Gaton said with disappointment.

Richard could feel that being paired with the earl would end in tragedy. Right now, he still had apprehensions and contradictions welling deep in his heart. He didn't feel close to the Archerons yet, even if he could never sever his relationship with them.

After pondering for a bit, a figure flashed in his mind, and he spoke immediately. "I choose Coco, and I'll pick the next one when I return."

"Coco?" Gaton was taken aback. This was a completely foreign

word to him.

“Coco, Mary, Archeron.” Richard spat each word out. His cool demeanour let Gaton know that no further discussions were needed on this matter.

Gaton did not dwell on the matter any further. Instead, he looked at Richard deep in the eye and said, “Kiddo, remember this. After you have arrived at the new plane, every decision of yours will affect your followers’ life and death. There is no place for impulse when you make a decision! Housekeeper!”

The door opened slightly, and the old housekeeper walked in. Gaton pointed at Richard and instructed, “Bring this kid to... umm... Coco. She will be his companion henceforth!”

The housekeeper was startled, but he quickly returned to his normal calm before taking Richard with him.

BANG! After Richard had left, Gaton smashed his fist on the table.

He still couldn’t recall who Coco was! That could only mean one thing: that girl had no special ability whatsoever. She was no different from an ordinary member of the family.

After some time, Gaton’s green face resumed a normal complexion. He sighed, and shook his head.

# Book 1, Chapter 105 - Partner

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The housekeeper brought Richard to a part of the island he'd never been to, leading him through a murky corridor until they came upon a set of stairs.

This was a six-storey building, situated behind the castle. There was no special layout to the construction and the rooms were extremely cramped, with many people being forced to fit into limited space. There were a total of five such buildings, built for the branches of the Archeron Family and the best of slaves, as well as high-ranked officials and young knights.

Because of the relatively small area of the floating island, two to four people would share a single room. Coco, however, was on the top floor that was allocated to the youths of the family. Those were single rooms, because their partners hadn't been decided yet and they needed the convenience to enter and leave.

The housekeeper seemed to be extremely familiar with everyone in the floating island. Although there were slaves which bowed towards him along the way, he did not stop and ask for directions. Instead, he brought Richard to a room at the end of the corridor, and knocked on the door.

"Who is it?" Coco's gentle voice appeared from behind the door.

The housekeeper reported his name, and Coco seemed startled, "Ah, please wait for a moment." Moments later, Coco opened the door. She had a shawl draped over her shoulders, covering the upper half of her body, and a white gown which extended to the legs. Her dainty white feet which stepped on the carpet seemed rather striking. The time now was extremely late in the night, and it seemed like Coco had been woken up from her sleep.

To the youths of the Archeron branch families, the housekeeper was a secondary figure of authority behind only Gatton himself. This was more so for the weaker families. Thus, the moment she

heard the housekeeper was standing outside Coco immediately got up and wrapped a shawl around herself without a change of clothes.

She looked at the housekeeper, and then at Richard who was standing behind, as if understanding everything. She immediately bowed, “Are we going to conduct a magic experiment now? Please wait a few minutes, I’ll have a quick change of clothes!”

To Coco, this job was far more important than her sleep.

The housekeeper stopped her, speaking in an unhurried tone, “No, this has nothing to do with magic experiments. Coco Mary Archeron, you have the honour of being chosen by young master Richard as his first partner. Since young master has to set off at first light tomorrow, he shall be spending the night with you.”

“What?!” Coco cried in surprise, and her face turned pale as she unconsciously retreated by two steps.

The housekeeper was not going to repeat things a second time for her. Instead, he went to the side and said to Richard, “Young master, please enter. Also, I will be waking you up at five in the morning for breakfast. We will be setting off at six-thirty. The journey tomorrow is long, so please restrain yourself slightly tonight.”

Richard nodded with an indifferent expression.

The housekeeper turned around to leave, but Coco dashed out from her room, pulling on his hand and asking fervently, “Sir! How could it be me? You must have made a mistake. Yes, it can only be an error!”

The housekeeper did not try to pull away his hand nor explain, and seemed not to be bothered by Coco’s words and actions. He only bowed elegantly to Coco, but the lack of explanation ascertained that none of this was wrong. In fact, this old housekeeper that was over sixty had never committed any

mistakes in the past 20 years.

Richard who was still standing by the door said indifferently, “It’s not wrong, I chose you.”

Coco’s little mouth gaped open, and she was shocked for a moment. Afterwards, she hurried to Richard’s side and bowed deeply, “Young master Richard, please consider again! I have no bloodline ability, and am only a level 2 illusionist without any other talents. A commoner like me cannot be matched with your peerless talent. I definitely will not be able to give birth to a prodigious child!”

Richard’s brows furrowed, he could astutely feel that Coco’s reactions and words were too unbefitting of the situation. No matter what reasons she might have, anger began to swell deep in his head. Any youth brimming with vigour, if rejected in such a blunt manner, would definitely be angry.

Coco’s voice was rather loud, and several doors on the corridor had opened. Heads popped out from these doors, belonging to the young men and women. When they saw what was happening, they had spat their tongues out in jest or smiled politely towards the housekeeper before returning back into their rooms. The faces of several young women were filled with envy and jealousy. They could not piece together why Coco, whose only positive was her looks, would be chosen by Richard. Was she lucky or charismatic, and if so why didn’t they notice it before?

Richard heard the curses of the young ladies, but acted as if he didn’t. He looked at Coco’s ashen face, as well as her eyes that began to well up with tears. He raised his head and asked the housekeeper, “Can I still change partners?”

The eyes of the housekeeper did not betray his thoughts, and in an unchanging tone of voice, with neither lack nor excess of respect, he replied. “This is your choice, and it has been approved by Master. Now that it has officially taken effect, it is even harder

to revoke it. If you have a better candidate in your heart, my own suggestion is for you to choose again. After all, you have multiple choices granted to you. This complex authority granted to you, to my understanding, is limited to just one. However, if you insist on changing and choosing another companion, it can be done. But it requires Master Gatón's approval as well as some procedures. Next, you have to prove whether you used Coco before or not..."

After the long explanation from the housekeeper, some hope seemed to appear on Coco's face. It seems like she had wanted to speak, but she was not so stupid as to interrupt the housekeeper, nor to try persuading Richard again.

Suddenly, hastened footsteps sounded on the stairs, and a handsome young man appeared by the stairs. Richard seemed to notice it and turned around, his icy gaze landing on the young man. The housekeeper turned around as well, standing quietly and observing him.

In an instant, the temperature of the sixth floor seemed to drop to sub-zero levels, causing some people to shiver.

The young man suddenly turned rigid. His gaze flitted from Richard, to the housekeeper, and then to Coco before he looked her deep in the eyes. Under the penetrative yet silent gaze of the housekeeper, sweat began to form on his forehead, causing him to be unable to speak. He greeted the housekeeper with a stiff bow, and said, "I came to the wrong floor." He turned around, his heavy footsteps seemed to reflect the feelings in his heart.

Just then, Richard's somewhat ruthless voice sounded out, "I'm not changing anymore, it'll be her!"

# Book 1, Chapter 106 - Partner

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Richard's voice wasn't loud, but it travelled quite far in the quiet corridor. Several disappointed gasps slipped through the throats of the young ladies peering out their rooms, and a huge thud resounded from the staircase as if something heavy had fallen to the ground. Coco's face remained pale, her little mouth opening and closing but with no words coming out. She stood rooted to the ground for a while, but neither Richard nor the housekeeper hurried her, as if they hadn't noticed her abnormal behaviour. She finally lowered her head and returned to her room, waiting for Richard to enter.

Before the door closed, the housekeeper reminded Richard to rest and not exert himself too much.

Coco's room was quite small, a mere ten square metres in size. The small bed, closet, and table were all it took to make it look packed. However, the room was quite neat, with a diary lying on the desk. Beside the diary were a quill pen and a bottle of ink. A vase of orchids sat on the windowsill, occasionally emitting a bout of fragrance.

There were no extra decorations in the tranquil room, making it seem like that of the daughter of a gentleman from a village. This room was like a patch of plain white flowers amidst the floating islands and the volcano, possibly destroyed at any time. The room was obviously themed after Coco's temperament.

The said girl was stood by the door, her hands clutching the hems of her skirt. Her head was kept low, hiding her expression, but just that showed her absolute nervousness.

Richard looked over the room once more before walking in front of Coco. He reached for her light brown hair, stroking her face before he lifted her bowed head to make her look him in the eye.

The girl trembled violently the moment his hand made contact



with her skin. She tried to lower her head again, but Richard's hand firmly kept it in place, letting her know that this was a request that could not be refused.

Coco lifted her head, her eyes filled with despair and fear. Tears had already welled up, but they did not flow. She suddenly sneezed, wrapping her arms around herself and trembling as if an extreme cold had descended upon the room. She had indeed felt chilly— Richard's hands were extremely cold, and his gaze all the more so.

“So, apart from those like you, there's high-ranked slaves, guards, and...” Richard paused, speaking the following words with intent, “... novice knights here.”

Coco shivered once more.

Richard did not let the conversation carry on further, instead taking his hand off her chin and allowing her head to bow down once again. He then proceeded to pry the hands wrapped in front of her chest apart, albeit in an unhurried manner. The shawl fell to the ground, revealing the young lady's rapidly heaving bosom.

Coco's skin was snow white, and a trace of cleavage could be seen through the nightgown. Her breasts weren't proud mountains like Demi's, but for her body size they were perfect.

Richard's right hand touched Coco's neck, causing her to tremble again. However, he paid no heed to her silent refusal, bringing his hand down along her skin all the way to her breasts. His finger hit the collar of her nightgown, but it did not stop. He instead pulled the gown down, revealing the surface of her breasts. Just as a tinge of pink revealed itself he stopped, but his hand remained in that precarious position.

Coco's heart was beating rapidly, but she mustered all her might to control her breathing. Any big movements and her breasts would spill out of the gown.

At this moment, a devilish voice rang in her ears, “Archeron women must maintain their chastity before a partner is selected for them. Have you abided by the laws?”

Coco’s body froze like a statue, and after some time she nodded her head with great difficulty.

Richard smiled, tracing his fingers along the exposed flesh before speaking, “Really? But I don’t trust you. How about you prove it to me right now?”

After several minutes in this position, Coco relaxed her tensed body, and her hands dropped to her side as she abandoned all form of resistance. There was no use at all to resist in the first place. Her destiny had been set the moment she set foot on this island. If not Richard, someone else would have chosen her. This was a duty she had to perform in exchange for the privileges she received. If she did not want to do such a thing, she would have to leave.

Coco knew that she was unable to leave. Once child of the family gained a certain amount of sensibility, they would realise the duties they had to fulfil and the privileges they could enjoy. They had to accept their fates.

Richard harrumphed at the sight of Coco dropping her resistance, retreating before he cast a detection spell on her body. As expected, there was very little magical response. She was almost like a regular human, and no runes could be attached on her body.

Richard removed his outer garments, tossing his shoes by the door and climbing onto Coco’s little bed.

“Come here!” he patted at the space beside him. Coco bit her lips, accepting her fate as she laid beside Richard.

The bed was extremely narrow, and Richard’s body was already fully grown. With Coco on it now, it was extremely cramped. The moment she laid on bed, Richard embraced her and their bodies stuck close together, each even being able to feel the heartbeat of

the other. Coco's heart throbbed frantically, but Richard's heart actually slowed down, each thump resolute and strong.

Contrary to her expectations, Richard did not make any other moves towards her. He instead closed his eyes, and after some time a light snore rang out. He had actually fallen asleep!

Coco couldn't believe her eyes, yet it had happened before her. She did not dare move at all, she was afraid of waking him up. She maintained her awkward position for a while longer, but could no longer withstand it. This had only been ten minutes, but to her it seemed to be a century. Her body softly collapsed on Richard's body, and exhaustion assailed her, causing her eyes to close. In her dreamy, half-awake state, Coco could feel a strange sense of security leaning into Richard's embrace.

The magic lamp in the room had consumed its resources, eventually dimming. A seed in the corner of the room projected a hazy drizzle of light, giving a touch of serenity to the place.

Coco wasn't aware of how long she had slept, but when she woke up the sky was still dark. Richard got off the bed and wore his clothes, just before the door was knocked several times in a certain rhythm before it quieted down again. The loudness and rhythm was a custom, something only the old housekeeper knew.

Coco sat up from her bed, still unable to believe that Richard had let her off. However, there was some worry mixed in with that glee.

Richard picked up the seed after putting on his clothes. Only once he reached the door did he turn to look at Coco, saying, "I don't plan to change partners."

"Oh," Coco replied lightly, the slight trace of hope she'd held out sinking into a valley of despair.

Richard was quite aware of Coco's attitude and what she wanted, and even more sure of the reasons behind her actions. The

problem was that Coco was the best target if he wanted to maintain his distance from the Archerons, at least until he returned from the planar wars. He had no love nor care for her, so he wasn't going to fulfill her wishes if they inconvenienced him. That was especially true in important affairs.

Coco was like a white flower at the foot of a volcano. Fragile yet beautiful, and easy to overlook. People often plucked such things on a whim.

# Book 1, Chapter 107 - Journey

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The old housekeeper shot a glance at Coco as Richard left the room, before closing the door and following him out. He asked along the way, “Master Richard, should I have Coco move to your residence, now that she’s your partner?”

Just as he was about to nod, Richard saw a handsome youth standing in the corner not far away, the same one who’d run up the stairs yesterday. He looked slightly older than himself, about twenty years or so of age, but had good proportions and looked rather fit. He didn’t have bulging muscles, but his body still radiated life energy. On top of everything, he was handsome and had distinct features with a pair of clear eyes.

Richard noticed that he was a novice knight— backup for true rune knights— the moment he’d seen him last night. If he grew more powerful within the next few years, to the extent that he could bear four runes, he would truly become a rune knight. If he didn’t, he would be sent to Archeron territory as a low-ranked officer.

Amongst the novice knights were children of far-out branch families, and external elites who’d been selected and trained from their youth. Richard hadn’t seen this young man on the night of the banquet, signifying that he was either not an Archeron or was only the offspring of a distant branch with no status to speak of. In other words, he didn’t possess the right to have a partner.

Richard halted in his steps as he strained his eyes, trying to look at the lad who was pacing back and forth. The young man quickly took his leave as soon as he made eye contact with Richard’s cold and indifferent gaze.

Richard watched the diminishing back view of the man and his expression fell slightly. After a moment of uncomfortable silence, he told the housekeeper in an unsympathetic tone, “Forget it, let

her stay here”.

The housekeeper nodded in response, not uttering a word. It was as if he did not see the young man at all.

A small team was already waiting for Richard at the plaza. He didn't carry much baggage, only a case of clothes and daily essentials, along with another that stored his runecrafting materials. It wasn't Mordred escorting him this time around, instead Dragonmage Lina. There were also four rune knights, and ten light cavalry.

The team set off towards the teleportation temple, where Richard saw the first comrade that would accompany him through his planar wars— cleric Flowsand of the Church of the Eternal Dragon, title Daybreak. He got off his horse at high priestess Ferlyn's indication, entering Flowsand's carriage.

Lina scoffed at the carriage at first, but once she got closer her opinion changed. The carriage was for more than just comfort; although it looked like any common noble carriage, there was a spell formation imprinted on the outside that would keep anything happening within completely concealed.

It would be a long but urgent journey, and this would be the only chance for Flowsand and Richard to talk alone. It was clear that the cleric had something to tell him.

Along with the carriage were two coachmen, but both would return to Faust as soon as they arrived at Mokoff Port. The interiors were plain but sophisticated, its base colour a light gold similar to that of the church. Richard felt a sense of majesty as he stepped foot on the carriage, as if he was in the Church of the Eternal Dragon itself.

Flowsand was seated opposite him, looking about the same age as himself. The girl had long, light-gold hair and eyebrows, the colour making the brows barely visible if one didn't look close. However, that gave the already-beautiful lady an air of mystery— vaguely

reminiscent of the ruins at the centre of the Church of the Eternal Dragon. There were complicated veined lines between her brows, with it being another mystery whether that was the effect of certain divine spells or she was just born that way.

“I am Flowsand, level 8 cleric of the Church of the Eternal Dragon.” Flowsand introduced herself the moment Richard got on. “Ignore the unusual name, it was something Teacher Ferlyn gave me. I do not know what my true name is, I was abandoned before the entrance of the Church when I was still an infant.

“Outside of the more common divine spells, I specialise in the divine spells of the Eternal Dragon. This is my weapon, the Book of Time.” Flowsand took out a thick, gold leather book, showing it to Richard before she took out a map and revealed it to the boy. It was a hand-drawn map of Mokoff Port and the surrounding sea area, detailing the hundreds of islands scattered nearby.

Flowsand pointed to one of the further islands and said, “I know Marquess Gaton set up a military base for you in the plane we’re going to, but he’s yet to pick a teleportation point. Teacher Ferlyn chose this place for us, no one knows about it as of now. This island has enough plains, forests and essential deepwater ports. The continent isn’t far away, and it’s especially close to Mokoff Port and Port Rose of the Archerons so we can set up the portal there.

Richard nodded, making a mental note of the position of the island. Flowsand then stowed the map away, passing Richard an emerald gem before saying, “This life crystal will be able to stabilise the seed for a while, so you won’t have to carry it everywhere. You can just leave it in this carriage during our journey.”

The girl didn’t speak further after Richard stowed the crystal away, closing her eyes. All signs of life seemed to dissipate the moment her eyelids closed completely, leaving Richard unable to feel her aura at all. It was like she’d disappeared into thin air.

This shocked him beyond words. He opened his own eyes again, seeing the girl sitting there deathly still. It wasn't that she had no aura, no— she'd already become one with the archaic aura within the carriage.

It seemed like Flowsand had her own unique way of meditation and practice, and Richard didn't want to disturb her. He took out a book himself, reading it to pass the time. The journey was long, but the inside and outside of the carriage were worlds apart. He felt almost no jolts, and could hear nothing from the outside world.

Richard took his time with the book, even repeating a few pages. He was so focused on reading that he didn't even realise when Flowsand woke up to observe him silently.

"You're studying history?" Flowsand asked out of the blue, seeming a little surprised.

"Hm," Richard raised his head as he answered, closing the book and passing it over. He was particularly willing to interact with Flowsand, since she would be an important companion in the dangerous planar wars. Trust and chemistry between comrades was a factor that could decide life and death on the battlefield.

Flowsand received the book without any hesitation and asked, "You're interested in the history of the silvermoon elves? They are the descendants of the ancient elven empire, but today there only a handful of tribes left on Norland. With your father's assault on Evernight Forest, there aren't any big groups left in human territory, a mere few tribes scattered here and there.

"If you're interested in the elves and elven culture, you should visit the Evergreen continent. It lies to the west of Norland, across the vast oceans. The continent is still ruled by an elven monarch. Or you could come to the church once we return from the planes and look through some art pieces Teacher Ferlyn collected from the time of the elven empire."



Richard gave her a simple smile, “My primary interest is in the attack Marquess Gaton led on Silvermoon Palace. It’s a classic example of a major victory with a numeric disadvantage. But I realised there’s rather few records about it, so I can only read up more and learn about it indirectly.”

# Book 1, Chapter 108 - Journey

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Flowsand nodded her head, apparently not finding it strange that Richard didn't just ask his father about the events of that day. She spoke naturally, as if this was a common topic, "Indeed, there are few records on that battle. Marquess Gaton suffered a severe injury in the final moments of that war, but his vice-commander had already finished surrounding the remaining silvermoon elves. The elven royalty would never surrender, so there were no royal prisoners from that war. The only elves they managed to bring back were peasants, which became slaves of the imperial family. Marquess Gaton himself never publicised the results of his campaign, so there wasn't much recorded about it. Furthermore... If I were to speak the truth, not many people like the Archerons, so they naturally wouldn't want to chronicle their feats."

"So that's what happened... Thank you, Flowsand," Richard said in earnest.

However, now done with her explanation, Flowsand continued to speak, "If you have the time to browse through history, I suggest you take the time to read the notebooks Teacher Ferlyn gave you. They contain information about the myriad planes, as well as the teachings of the Eternal Dragon. It will benefit our expedition.

"If you don't have any interest in that, from what I've heard you are an amazing runemaster. Think of the battles we will face, and decide on a rune befitting of me. When we arrive safely in the new plane, you can make a set of runes for me."

"Runes?" Richard was rather surprised. He looked between Flowsand's brows, "Isn't that a special rune on your forehead? If I guess correctly, this rune contains some form of powerful ability, does it not? It should be grade 4."

"But I only have one rune on my body right now," the cleric countered.

“A grade 4 rune isn't enough?” Richard laughed hoarsely, but when he saw Flowsand's solemn look, he withdrew his smile. He instead pondered in shock for a while, before asking, “You can withstand more runes?”

Flowsand nodded her head.

A grade 4 rune required ten times the carrying capacity of an elementary rune. Richard was already surprised that Flowsand could bear one; after all, anyone that could even withstand a grade 3 rune below level 10 deserved to be proud of themselves. He'd never have thought that Flowsand could actually bear even more.

“If that's the case, I'll have to offend you for a moment.”

“It's no offence. Don't tarry, if you can craft a rune for me I will allow you to inscribe it on my body.”

Richard was rather stupefied. The chest was the most likely location on one's body to place a rune. Of course inscribing a rune directly was much better than using an attachment slot, reducing the capacity requirements and allowing more efficient energy transfer, but the tolerance for modifications was also low at 5% and it would be extremely difficult to change runes in the future. The process of removing a tattooed rune was excruciatingly painful, and with the failure rate of the normal runemaster most knights wouldn't even consider direct inscription if it wasn't a high-grade rune.

However, since Flowsand said that she did not mind, Richard would no longer dwell on this matter. But when he cast the detection spell, he received yet another shock.

Flowsand's arms and legs, as well as her chest and stomach all responded with powerful energy waves. Richard immediately realised that she still had the capacity left to withstand another, albeit weaker, grade 4 rune! This toppled his knowledge on the world of runecrafting.

There were two things that influenced the runic power of a rune knight. One was their carrying capacity, while the other was the number of possible positions on their bodies to attach runes to. More positions with the same capacity would be able to fit in more runes. Although a grade 4 rune took up ten times that capacity of an elementary one, a rune knight with ten elementary runes would easily defeat one with a single grade 4 rune. Many rune knights, including several powerful figures on the continent, were often troubled by the lack of rune positions at higher levels. For example, the illustrious divine set of Saint Peter required at least five slots, and one needed enough capacity on top of that.

Richard himself only had two, but Flowsand showed a whopping six options to choose from!

“How is it?” Flowsand asked.

Richard rubbed his temples and smiled wryly, “This... exceeds my expectations. I’ll need some time to think.”

“That’s no problem. We have enough time, so have at it!” Done with what she wanted to say, Flowsand closed her eyes once more.

After a more than ten hour non-stop journey, the party finally reached Giantwood Village. This was an unassuming town under Earl Goliath’s governance. It was located in a remote area, in the midst of mountains and endless forests. The only specialty of Giantwood Village was their wood, but due to difficulty in transportation that didn’t bring much economic benefit to the villagers. Since there was no trade to speak of, there were very few visitors as well. From any angle, Giantwood Village was an ordinary, poor, and quiet village. There were only a hundred or so families here, and their lives had not changed in many years.

In the depths of the forest behind this village laid the death training camp of the Archerons. This camp was over a hundred years old, having groomed countless assassins, cursemasters, and warriors in its time. This was a place free of race and class— every

individual that entered was trained, and the only task they were given was to survive. To survive until their training came to an end.

Most of the participants of this death training camp were orphans, death-row criminals, and slaves. There were also psychopaths and fanatics here, those who found joy in the act of killing. There were also a significant number of Archerons, in order to pursue greater power and strength, that were willing to volunteer and enter this camp. However, all participants were treated equally. In the face of death, an Archeron and orphan had no difference in status. If they wanted to live, they could only rely on their brains or brawns, or perhaps both.

Of course, Richard was not here to receive training, but to choose a soulguard. This was one of the resources that the family would provide for promising talents.

The soulguard would be bound by a soul contract that tied their soul to Richard's. Any thoughts of betrayal would wipe out their very soul, and they also served to assist Richard in resisting soul attacks. Of course, the reverse was not true. A soul attack directed at the soulguard would not affect Richard at all.

Under the power of the contract, the soulguard and their master would have their destinies intertwined, making for the most loyal of guardians. However, such contracts were extremely rare, with most coming from the blessings of the Eternal Dragon. Legendary clerics and priests could create them as well, but making even one required a large amount of divine power and a small portion of one's very soul. A new legendary cleric would drop out of the legendary realm with just two, so few would be willing to do such a thing.

As for the contracts coming from the Eternal Dragon, there was a factor of chance involved. Only those who were extremely lucky would be able to obtain such a thing.

Richard took out his soul-binding contract when they arrived at their destination, causing Flowsand to blink her eyes several times in surprise.

# Book 1, Chapter 109 - Death Camp

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Most of the party remained in Giantwood Village, at the village's only inn. In the company of Dragonmage Lina and the village chief, Richard headed towards the death training camp.

The Archeron death training camp was located deep in the forest with a total of seven different gathering points. The location closest to the village was at least a hundred kilometres away, without any trail to follow. Even with the village chief as a guide, the three of them took over three hours to arrive at the camp.

The ones being trained here were warriors and other classes who depended on physical strength. Passing a disorganised fence, Richard entered the camp. He saw several shabby huts within that made it seem like a small village, finding it difficult to believe that this was the famed death training camp of the Archerons. Only when the instructor here, Schiller, was stood in front of him did he confirm that he was at the right place.

Schiller was a man of average build, with short, grassy hair that was a complete mess. There was no magic armour on him, only a saber that was hung at his waist. The weapon's scabbard was plain and dirty, but the man's clothes were clean. Outside of that, there was nothing special in his appearance.

However, for some reason Richard felt like he was being pricked by a needle as he looked at the man standing before him, even having to squint his eyes a little. His eyes soured very quickly, almost tearing up. Just as the tears were about to flow, a gentle magic enveloped his entire body and soothed that needle-like sensation.

Lina chided Schiller in an icy voice, "Schiller, what are you trying to do? Are you tired of living?"

Schiller smiled like nothing had happened and his expression was relaxed. He spoke in a casual manner, "Nothing much. I just

wanted to see what the young master who's about to take away my best warrior is like. Young master Richard has a great appearance."

Lina snorted icily a couple of times, "What does the Young Master's strength have to do with you? Do you really think that this death training camp belongs to you? You're just this place's manager. Have you been here so long that your brain rotted away?" Her rebuke was harsh and direct, not giving the man any face.

A black aura coiled around Schiller's face. Although he maintained his smile, it seemed like the calm before the storm. "This is Earl Goliath's land. And Lina, I don't recall you being my match."

There was an extremely explosive atmosphere in the air. Richard watched the two bicker on with an indifferent expression, but an almost undetectable light started to glow under his robes. He'd prepared a curse already, but he wasn't sure how useful it would be in a battle between the two.

Suddenly, Lina chuckled coquettishly. "I am just a mage, how could I be a match for a shadow guard like yourself? Why don't I change places with someone else? Who do you want? You definitely wouldn't dare fight Mordred, so how about Byfang or Asiris? Or the two tanks, Kaylen and Kayde? Maybe you want all of us to come at you together..."

Schiller snorted, and his expression turned even darker. He had wanted to say more, but eventually decided to suppress it. Gaton's thirteen knights were not the strongest individually, but they were extremely united when facing an enemy. Even if more than half of Gaton's rune knights were not Schiller's match, any two of them would be able to beat him up easily.

Lina's haughtiness had yet another meaning contained within. Many of the thirteen knights were generals who were able to lead the troops, and their status was different from Schiller. She had no



need to fight the shadow guard one on one to know who was better.

Lina suddenly withdrew all of her arrogance, and said solemnly, “Schiller, I’m telling you this because of Earl Goliath; I sincerely urge you to stop all your tricks. Every important Archeron outside of Marquess Sauron has agreed about Young Master Richard. If you delay his plans, the first one to come for your throat will likely be Earl Goliath himself.”

Schiller’s eyes flashed as he stared intently at Lina. The Dragonmage was calm and collected, however, looking him straight in the eye. He eventually had to turn his head and look at Richard, before speaking in a deep voice, “Alright then, young master Richard, please follow me. I hope you will be able to find a suitable candidate.

“Let me first give you a tour of our small camp, for you to better understand the environment our brave warriors have been living in.”

Richard walked into the largest hut under Schiller’s guidance, frowning immediately at the sharp smell that assaulted his nostrils. The hut was big, but with thirty people crammed into there was very little free space. There was no bed in the room, only mattresses laid onto the floor spread apart to allow one to walk through the middle. Several large brutes, stark naked, were laid on the floor in a disorganised manner. Their barbaric, unruly aura could not be concealed.

Inside the wooden hut, several brutes were wildly fucking a woman. The woman was just as muscled as them, and seemed to be a participant of the camp. However, she wasn’t strong enough to avoid being a toy of these savages. Another woman was wrestling a large man in a contained space. The result of a loss went without saying.

Seeing Richard and company walk in, especially the voluptuous

Lina, the brutes lying on the ground stood up immediately, their eyes blazing with fervent passion.

Lina did not get angry. She instead pouted her lips, sending them a flying kiss. This was adding fuel to the fire, and the clamouring noises grew much louder as more than half the people here had already stood up. However, while their eyes were spewing flames, their bodies remained clenched and on standby. No matter what, these two coming here at this time was extremely bizarre.

Once Schiller entered as well, all of them turned solemn. Those men with killing intent retreated as well.

Richard stood unmoving by the door, and his gaze swept past the room. He suddenly spoke, "There's no need to look any longer." Before even waiting for Lina or Schiller to reply, he turned around and walked out.

After exiting the hut, Richard walked to the centre of the campgrounds and looked up at the night sky, not saying a thing. There was indeed no need to look any longer. These brutes in the hut were level 7 or 8 warriors. Furthermore, in such an environment, he did not discover any extraordinary talent. Even just taking them to another plane would be a waste of resources, forget using a soul contract on them.

The fifth moon hung in the night sky, its light purplish moonlight representing Alucia's divine wrath.

# Book 1, Chapter 110 - Death Camp

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Lina followed Richard out of the wooden hut, standing beside him with a trace of a mysterious smile on her face. She crossed her arms, looking at Schiller as if she was waiting for a scene to play out. Schiller walked out as well, although his face had grown somewhat unsightly.

Lina was about to speak, but was stopped with a wave of Richard's arms. He didn't look at Schiller at all, instead staring up at the purple moon that hung in the skies. He said indifferently, "This is the night of the purple moon, Mister Schiller. Do you know what it represents?"

Schiller growled, "I am just a brute."

"It represents Alucia's wrath," Richard explained pleasantly.

Schiller's expression froze for a moment, "I'm just a brute. I don't understand what Young Master is trying to say. Is this Alucia you're speaking of a beauty?"

Richard responded with a question of his own, "What is this place?"

"The Archerons' death training camp," Schiller replied.

Richard looked at the moon and asked softly, "Mister Schiller, I still don't know your surname."

"Toller," Schiller replied, but his expression somewhat changed.

"What is the relationship between the Archerons and Tollers?" Richard pressed on.

"... There is none." Schiller seemed to understand Richard's intentions, and his face turned extremely dark. It actually looked like tears were about to fall.

"So, what level are you at right now?"

Schiller paused for a moment before saying, "... Level 19, Shadow

Guard.”

Only then did Richard turn around to look Schiller in the eye, his voice turning icy, “Neither an Archeron, nor a legendary being. I don’t understand on what basis you assume that the people in this camp are your private property!”

Schiller pupils constricted, and a murderous aura poured out of his body. This outright reproach left him unable to repress his killing intent. He was the one who’d brought this camp to its current level of power, his greatest achievement in the family. However, it was only in the past few years that the family had shown any interest in him.

It was understandable why his actions were completely different from his pleasant words. The relationships between the Archerons weren’t too good, and those with equal levels of bloodline had great rivalry between them. Earl Goliath and Marquess Gaton, for example, were basically enemies. This death training camp was built in Goliath’s territory, so of course it was controlled by the Earl. Schiller was thus one of Goliath’s men.

Schiller wanted to retort, but his expression suddenly changed as a tiny golden scroll revealed itself in Richard’s hands. He recognised this item— it was a soul contract. Just the presence of this scroll was several times more effective in confirming Richard’s authority than Lina herself. The blessings of the Eternal Dragon were based on a factor of luck, but to get the soul contract meant one definitely had to offer a sacrifice that satisfied the Eternal Dragon. This scroll was equivalent to a thirty-year boost to one’s life!

Richard casually tossed this priceless item to Schiller’s hands and spoke icily, “I’m sure you know what this item is. I’m not here to play around, and my current mission cannot be changed by someone like you. I give you two choices: show me someone worthy of this scroll, or we leave.”

The scroll flashed a golden light, revealing a faint aura of time that allowed Schiller to confirm its authenticity. However, that put Schiller in a bad spot. This piece of paper now seemed as heavy as a mountain.

Just like Richard had said, nobody would bring out a soul contract if they were playing around. Not even the Sacred Alliance Emperor, Bloodthirsty Philip, would do so.

One of the resources the Archerons gave their core members was a personal bodyguard, trained at the death camp. However, the strength of that bodyguard was determined by the camp's manager, and normally nobody would press the issue even if someone was assigned a weakling. Since this camp was in Earl Goliath's territory, it was only natural that Gaton's son would be given a poor guard.

However, there was a huge difference between a regular bodyguard and a soulguard. The moment Richard took out the soul contract, Schiller was left with no room whatsoever to maneuver in. If he sent the boy back empty-handed, he was sure that Gaton's knights would come looking to kill him. Mordred or Asiris would definitely be overseeing the attack, so there would be no chance of escape. The best end would be being killed on the spot.

Schiller had never expected Richard's attitude to be this unyielding, causing this stalemate in the situation. In fact, once Gaton had successfully entered Faust the relationship between him and his brother had mellowed. They had even begun to explore some avenues of cooperation, giving Richard a soulguard being an important one. But despite this change in circumstances, Schiller still treated Richard and Lina in such an unbecoming manner. Whether it was that he was being obstinate or that he wasn't up to date on the information, only he knew.

The original missive Schiller had been given was to do his best to make things difficult for Richard, but not to hide the participants from him. He still had to show Richard the best talents in his

camp. This was a contradictory command, but it worked well to sum up the relationship between Gaton and Goliath.

Schiller's expression wavered, but Richard did not press on. He instead looked up at the purple moon, something that only caused the invisible pressure to grow. Schiller finally made up his mind and returned the scroll to Richard, before easing his tone and saying, "I understand your request. Please follow me; it's already growing late, and we still have a ways to go."

Schiller got on a horse, taking Richard and Lina through the forest. It took another hundred kilometres for them to reach a stream at the foothills of a mountain. There were two rows of disorderly wooden huts here, along with several caves that led deep into the mountain.

Schiller pointed ahead, "This is the true death camp. The most talented warriors of the family all walk out of here. Right now, there are three people who are above level 10. I'll call them back right away."

Richard nodded his head, and Schiller took out a metal whistle. He blew hard on it, and a shrill ear-piercing screech travelled throughout the area, causing a nearby flock of birds to fly away in fright.

Several of the wooden huts opened up, young men and women of various appearances walking out. The one commonality between them all was their wolf-like eyes.

Richard's gaze swept past every participant present. Suddenly, the door of the wooden hut at the highest point of the stream was blasted open, as if the hut was going to collapse. A large brute walked out, almost completely naked except for some beastskin wrapped around his waist. He was extremely tall and sturdy, his chiseled muscles looking as hard as steel. The tiny wooden hut seemed barely able to hold his large body within, and he'd had to bend down to step through the door.

The large bloke walked out, and exclaimed, “Oh hoh! Boss, you brought new prey again?”

# Book 1, Chapter 111 - Soulguard

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Schiller spoke bluntly, “No, we are here to choose. Tonight, one lucky fellow will be chosen to be a soulguard. You get to show off your killing prowess in another plane!”

The big fellow’s eyes flashed like lightning, his gaze sweeping past Lina as his pupils constricted. He then looked over Richard, immediately picking up a poorly-crafted two-handed axe and waving it several times in the air. “Hey!” he roared, “Young master, pick me! Look, my axe can’t handle the hunger anymore!”

In the face of such a fervent request, Richard could only smile wryly. Schiller pointed at the man, “This is Gangdor, 21 years old. He’s a level 10 warrior with the bloodline of giants, having awakened Gaia’s Force. When it’s activated, it greatly increases his strength and defense. He’s one of the best candidates.”

Several people emerged from the caves of the mountain. Schiller pointed to another skinny youth, saying, “This is Kerfe, a level 10 assassin at 19 years of age. He has a mixed bloodline of humans and dark elves, his ability being Stealth. He’s also a good one.”

Finally, Schiller fingers pointed towards a woman with a cold and detached expression. “Dify of the Kamires, descendant of the highland wizards with powerful innate talent for magic. She is a natural-born warlock, possessing great firepower at any moment. Her bloodline ability is a magic boost as well. She’s the last candidate I want to introduce.”

The Archeron death camp only trained its participants upto level 10. Their talents and abilities would have awakened by then, so their future growth would depend on battle results.

All three of the candidates Schiller had picked were obviously much stronger than the other participants. They were extremely suitable for Richard’s requirements. The plane he was travelling to didn’t have a permanent portal yet, so level 10 was the limit of the



portal. Anyone above that boundary would likely affect the spacetime tunnel with their overwhelming power, being tossed into the currents of spacetime. Even a legendary being would not want to be caught in such a chaotic current.

Richard raised his hands and began a chant, but Lina was one step faster. She cast a group detection spell, avoiding having to cast one on every individual.

Richard vividly detected the magic response from each of them, confirming their rune capacity. With the standard requirement of an elementary rune at 10 points, Kerfe had a total 43 points of capacity, Dify 41, and Gangdor a tremendous 72! This fellow with his thirsty axe could actually withstand a total of four runes, and one of them could even be grade 3 as long as it was on the weaker end. If they were willing to spend several millions on him, he would immediately turn into a rune knight!

Gangdor sensed Richard's gaze on him changing, so he bellowed even more loudly before. But this time, it was towards the other candidates, "Hey, you useless maggots. Did you see that? The young master wants me! Me, Gangdor! Whoever is not happy can come forward, and we can battle! Let me show you how to use wits in a fight! Come, anyone? My axe can't handle the hunger anymore!"

Nobody moved, not even Kerfe or Dify. Gangdor's roar seemed to intimidate everyone else, and their behaviour indicated that he'd regularly beaten them in fights before. Richard was rather satisfied with this brute: He was already level 10 at 21 years of age, so it wouldn't be a problem for him to reach level 14 or 15 in the future. Even if he didn't improve from there, his high carry capacity would allow him to become a high-ranking rune knight. He would hold an important position in Richard's team in the future.

However Richard continued to think deeply, unable to make up his mind. Gangdor was an exemplary candidate, but it seemed unfitting to use a soul contract on him. A good warrior was

different from a good bodyguard, and Gangdor's talent didn't awe Richard all that much. Having lived in the Deepblue for a long time, Richard's appetite had already grown.

Noticing that several huts were still empty, Richard asked Schiller about it. That was when he learnt that some of the participants were still out in the forest, hunting. They hadn't been able to make it back in time because of the distance, but the man said it wasn't a problem since the promising candidates were already before Richard. There was no need to wait for any other people.

Just then, an ear-piercing scream split the skies above the forest, followed by the sounds of twigs and branches snapping. A bloodied man dashed out into the open in a flash, jumping into the stream and flailing in the water as he tried to swim away as fast as possible. The stream was rather deep, with fast-flowing currents and jagged reefs at the bottom. In his panic to run away, the man seemed to be severely injured. In a few moments, the fresh blood had already dyed the stream a faint pink.

"Level 11 warrior, no special abilities. This fellow is just prey for the death camp's participants," Lina whispered lightly into Richard's ears.

There were magic beasts amongst the prey for the death camp, but there were many humans as well. Many warriors of different race and class were placed in the forest, and the participants were tasked with hunting down and killing them before they escaped. They 'prey' was normally higher-levelled than the participants, with those awarding the most marks being level 14 or 15. The hunt was thus a perilous one, with plenty of cases where the predator became the prey.

Richard gazed at the edges of the forest, having the unknown feeling that the hunter would give him a surprise.

A rather scrawny white figure emerged silently from the forest.

It was a young girl in a tattered white dress, her clothes torn so badly that they could only be called rags. She had no defences to speak of, and the clothes didn't even cover her entire body. If not for cloths wrapped around her chest and waist, she would be essentially naked.

She was standing on top of a branch, her long fair legs contrasting the gloomy backdrop of the forest. The sight of her bare feet gripping the branch was somewhat eye-catching— every single one of her digits could be seen clearly. She had wild, shaggy hair that she seemed to have cut short herself. The silhouette of her face seemed rather beautiful, but the deep green eyes flashed like a hunter looking at their prey.

# Book 1, Chapter 112 - Soulguard

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The branches she was resting on were very delicate, making it hard to believe that they could even hold her weight. The branches were swaying even in the wind, but abruptly they sunk downwards under her force. Just before they crossed the breaking point they were relieved of her weight, and by the time they even returned to position she'd catapulted away at the speed of lightning.

Even just a jump left Richard gasping in awe. He'd learnt the techniques of the underworld himself, so he could recognise the profound control of strength behind that leap. Breaking a branch might seem like a small matter, but it would leave behind traces that were impossible to erase. A brilliant hunter could use such traces to track their prey. Even with her target right in front of her the girl didn't slack off in the slightest, leaving no tracks behind. If her actions were not because of prior training to take care of such detail, she had to have a natural disposition as an assassin.

The girl hugged the ground stealthily, reducing the distance between her and her prey at an unfathomable speed. She shot forth like a rocket every time her feet touched the granite rock, moving a few metres in a near instant. From a distance she just looked like a white apparition moving across the riverbank.

The injured prey had made his way across the stream with great difficulty. His steps were unsteady, and he eventually landed flat onto the ground. Injured and having to travel across the ice-cold water in the stream, he was obviously only seconds from falling apart. He struggled to crawl back up, but he fell down again pretty quickly, before eventually getting himself up and fleeing the scene in haste.

"This fellow is pretending, biding time for a final attack. It seems like he wants to take her down with him," Lina commented. Even though she'd only recently become a grand mage herself, her intuition and combat experience were not something Richard

could quantify. Lina could sense that Richard had grown interested in that hunter, so she added more information to help his judgement.

The youth sped up, leaning forward so much now that her hands almost touched the ground. She instantly charged through the riverbank, before going on all fours and leaping up like a ferocious beast. She left a blur of white in the air, using both hands to steady herself on the emerging rocks that dotted the surface of the stream as she shot from rock to rock.

To Richard, it was like a cunning winter wolf was chasing after her prey with all her might. She crossed the ten metres of the stream effortlessly, catching up with her target. Despite her great speed, she didn't seem to give out a single sound in the process.

On the other hand, the injured man had accurately predicted her exact position. He decided to give up the facade in that instant, turning around quickly as he pounced at her with a roar. Given the builds of the two, one could easily tell that his strength far exceeded hers, giving him the advantage in close quarters combat. However, the teenage girl did not have any idea of escaping, and she too, prowled towards the man.

Just as the two seemed about to collide, the girl jumped faster and higher than the man. She changed her position mid-air, avoiding the collision as she stepped on the man's body. Using him as a pivot she somersaulted forward, placing herself behind him. And then, with what seemed like a mysterious hand supporting her, she mysteriously changed direction to land on the man's back with a thud.

Time seemed to have stopped at this very moment, as the teenage girl held the prey in a chokehold with her right hand. Her left hand had suddenly conjured a blacksteel weapon.

Thus, under Richard's careful attention, the iron rod in the girl's hand viciously moved towards the man's hips. It sent shivers down

Richard's spine, so much so that he subconsciously clutched his glutes. Thankfully for him, many others reacted in the same way, Lina included.

The man abruptly let out a pathetic squeal, his body tensing up as he was fiercely catapulted to the ground. The girl flicked her wrist, burying the rod in the man's behind before she harshly removed it, leaving behind a spray of fresh blood.

She followed that up by rolling away from the prey, giving no chance for the man who was making a futile effort to survive. She instead steadied herself on the floor like a wolf, glancing at all the students in the wooden huts and on the cliff with the threat evident in her eyes. Kerfe, the one with the drow bloodline, moved towards her, but seeing her with no heavy injuries nor any signs of fatigue, he waved it away and retreated to his original position.

As for the other students, many largely avoided the teenage girl's vicious glance.

No one came forth to fight for the prey, and the man eventually lost any signs of struggle as he began to twitch on the ground. Having observed the scenario, the teenager then decided to walk to the prey, before she used a sharp blade of the steel weapon to slit the prey's throat, ending his suffering. Afterwards she probed around the prey's chest, and retrieved an engraved silver placard. She broke the chains of the placard took it in hand, walking towards Schiller.

The girl stopped only a few metres away from Schiller, not daring to get too close to him. Her body tensed up, evidently showing that she was in a very defensive state. The anxiety she showed at this juncture proved to be more intense than when she was facing the others of the training camp.

A dull thud rang out as she threw the placard in Schiller's direction, announcing in a rigid voice, "Placard... this month."

Schiller nodded his head, "This is your third placard in this

month. That's great! I'll get someone to send you your items tomorrow."

Lina explained the situation with a whisper. It seemed like the death camp added prey to the training every once in a while, giving all the prey placards. The students had to kill such prey every month, being rewarded with medals and reimbursement for their effort. The reimbursements included things such as equipment, resources, as well as potions that would enhance one's physique. Of all the rewards, the potion was the most sought after as they would enhance the member's fighting physique. And the students all had placards that would certify their identity. Should they be mistaken for prey, they could merely produce their placards to prove their identity to seek freedom. This would be much safer than simply running away.

As for the students who did not manage to fulfill their quotas every month, they would receive punishments in the first three months. The punishments included beatings of varying intensities, and were administered independent of gender.

The fourth time the students failed to complete their quota, they would be rendered the same status as the prey.

After the teenage girl threw the placard to Schiller, she shot a glance at Lina before slowly retreating. She was still very much guarded, and refused to leave her back facing any of them. Just at this juncture, a ray suddenly shone onto her body. The teenage girl watched the debris behind her fly into the air in shock.

A thud ensued almost instantly as she went prone, stealthily arming herself with the weapon that still had fresh blood on it. She levelled a deathly gaze onto Richard.

Lina took a step forward and shielded Richard, as she wielded the magical staff in her hands. With regards to the teenage girl's vicious aura, Lina appeared to have certain reservations. The Dragonmage was also taken aback by the fact that this teenage girl

would threaten even herself, as the teenage girl's strength was not particularly outstanding.

As for the ray of light shining on the teenage girl, it was a testing spell, just like what Lina had previously released. A typical mage only obtained conventional feedback about the target's strength, magic powers, and bloodline, but with Precision Richard was amongst the esteemed ones who could tell a target's capacity from the magic waves alone. It was not something even many true runemasters could manage.

Fearful of Lina and Schiller's formidable strength, and not feeling like she had been hurt, the teenage girl's killing aura slowly dissipated, as she retreated once more.

"Hold up!" Richard suddenly called to the teenage girl. He then pointed to her as he declared to Schiller: "I want her!"

Schiller's brows furrowed, "This is Waterflower, somewhere between 16 and 18 years old. She's currently a level 9 assassin, with an acute sense of smell for danger. She also has outstanding talent at combat, but she's not your best choice. The other three are all level 10 already, and unlike her they've actually awakened their bloodline abilities. Furthermore, she's very hard to tame."

Richard looked up and down over the teenage girl, and stated: "I have a soul contract, training her doesn't pose a problem at all. Also, why does she have such an uncommon name? Does she hail from any rare tribes? You don't seem sure of her age, either."

Schiller hesitated, before explaining, "I picked her up during one of my trips in the forest. She was living with a pack of moon wolves at that point, probably raised like a wolf cub. She looked about five years of age by normal standards, but even having learnt to speak she hasn't been able to explain exactly how long she'd lived with the wolf pack. That's why we don't know her definite age. As for her name, it was given to her by the other students in the training camp. They say that she's akin to an aquafloral fruit,



tasty yet formidable with the protection of lethal poison. She's completely unattainable by the common person."

"Alright! She's the one I want!" Richard had already made his decision.

Lina could not help but raise her concerns,: "Richard, are you sure you don't want to reconsider your decision? Even though she is gifted in combat, she has not been able to showcase her bloodline abilities yet; that's a flaw that you will not be able to make up for. Furthermore, Schiller said that she was raised by a pack of wolves, so we will never be able to properly confirm her heritage; we can't be sure whether she even has any bloodline potential at all. We should err on the side of caution, and choose a more suitable option like Gangdor."

Lina's worries were not unfounded. Theoretically, both one's bloodline and their rune capacity were instrumental components of their battle might. In a battle between two rune knights of equal level, the one with the higher-ranked ability would be able to completely suppress the other. Gaton had deliberately assigned Lina to Richard. It was done so that Richard could tap into her rich knowledge in the field of magic, aiding him in the selection of a befitting soulguard.

Having said that, Lina eyed Waterflower's attractive figure once more. She started to think that Richard wanted to choose the girl for her appearance. After all, Waterflower's looks were extraordinary. The earlier scene also suggested that she had a formidable sixth sense on the battlefield, allowing her to compete with those with more innate abilities than her. However, to use a soul contract on her seemed a bit of a waste.

Lina herself came from the upper class, possessing high expectations for class and elegance. Thus, she found Waterflower's tactics in attacking her prey's vitals quite distasteful. However, she wasn't surprised. A girl raised by wolves would naturally fight like one. The death camp itself focused on the opponent going down,

not how that was accomplished.

Having thought of this point, Lina immediately turned to look at Schiller: “How many guys have bedded Waterflower?”

What the dragonmage was hinting at was very obvious. For a girl to hail from such a chaotic place, she would probably have had intimate relationships with many men. The sight they’d seen in the initial location was proof of that.

However, Schiller’s next words defied that rule, “Right now, she’s still pure.”

“That’s impossible!” Lina immediately retorted.

“I picked her up myself. Before the age of 10, I did not allow anyone to touch her. And once she did reach that age, the other students of her batch haven’t been able to grow intimate with her either.”

# Book 1, Chapter 113 - Contract

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Lina frowned, not saying a word. This was not the time to jest; Schiller would not lie.

Schiller looked at Richard and sighed, “I am the one who adopted Waterflower, after all; she’s like a daughter to me. Of course I’d want her to be chosen to leave this place. But I have to say; apart from the purity of her body, which will be valuable to you, she really isn’t worthy of a soul contract.”

However, Richard had already taken out the contract, “I scanned her just now. She can carry grade 4 runes, possibly even grade 5. It doesn’t matter anymore whether she has bloodline abilities.”

“Grade 5 runes?” Lina and Schiller were both shocked. Even just grade 4 runes would allow her to become a third grade rune knight! This was the power level of one of Gaton’s knights, even if at the lower end! Indeed, such rune capacity would totally make up for a lack of bloodline abilities. Waterflower would be much more valuable than Gangdor that way, worthy of a soul contract.

However, Richard didn’t mention all of his observations. Waterflower had a capacity as high as 153 points, far more than the eighty to a hundred and twenty needed for a grade 4 rune. In this regard, even Flowsand with her 180 points of capacity wasn’t much better. On top of that, the magic had radiated from all over Waterflower’s body; she had as many as eight possible positions on her body, one more than Flowsand’s seven!

‘Daybreak’ Flowsand was a cleric of the Church of the Eternal Dragon in Faust, one who could possibly take the position of the current high priestess Ferlyn in the future. She was a talent to be reckoned with. Waterflower was already a monster for having more rune positions than her!

“Waterflower, come here,” Schiller waved the girl over. At this point, neither he nor Lina had any objections anymore.

The young girl looked at the three people before her with caution, but from their conversation she was more or less aware of what was going to happen. She moved over hesitantly, her guard held high. This was something that she'd learnt from beasts; to be extremely careful and alert when facing anyone or anything with great strength, regardless of their identity.

Schiller glanced over at Waterflower with an inexplicable look in his eyes, "You will be Master Richard's soulguard from today, and won't have to stay here anymore. You will be his second lifeline, someone who shares his destiny. Always act like how you did here, continuing to improve your power.

"And take this blade! It's been with me for years, I think it'll suit you." Schiller unlatched the metre long war blade from his waist and tossed it to Waterflower. She caught it in an instant, moving back at the speed of lightning as she looked at the other members of the camp. She only drew out a portion of the blade once she was sure that nobody would ambush her.

The weapon was less than three centimetres wide, with almost no reflections coming off the jet-black blade. It seemed inexplicably obscure, giving off an unnerving vibe as it left its sheath.

Lina was a master in appraisal as well, and she exclaimed the moment she saw the blade being drawn, "Mythical Goldsand! This is the Shepherd of Eternal Rest!"

Richard was shocked by it too. This material was indeed superior to even alchemic blacksteel, one of the highest-quality metals used to forge weapons. Weapons formed from it would be twice as strong as ordinary carbon steel weapons, also able to bear the power of two more enchantments. The sword Waterflower had in her hands was made by a great master, with the enchantments of Bleed, Tear, Sharpen, and Armour Break added within. Its power was clear.

Waterflower finally walked towards Richard under Schiller's urging, kneeling down upon Lina's orders. It was obvious from her expression and the cautious fiddling of her fingers that this proximity caused her great discomfort. It was possible she could hurt someone at any moment. With the Shepherd of Eternal Rest in her hands, and within such a small distance at that, even Lina felt uneasy.

Lina ended up casting two calming spells on Waterflower, finally causing the wolf-like teenager to settle down a little. Richard slowly unfurled the soul contract in his hands, chanting the spell written upon it. "In the name of Eternity, I unite my soul with the person before my eyes..."

As the chant was read out, the contract started to emit a beam of golden light that grew brighter and brighter. It disintegrated piece by piece, becoming grains of sand scattered in the air to form a golden cloud of dust. Waterflower raised her head slightly, gazing curiously at the coagulated magical sand that seemed to have taken a part of her life. She felt no more fear, instead a faint anticipation. Her sharp intuition let her know that this was the moment her destiny was changed.

The spell was complex and tedious, but finally all the golden grains of sand suddenly gathered into a stream of light. The light instantly shone onto Waterflower's forehead, condensing between her brows into an hourglass of light gold. It quickly turned upside down, its traces slowly disappearing into her body. Waterflower grew sluggish, fainting with a grunt while Richard felt like a portion of his soul had been extracted from his body in a split second, vanishing into the depths of space.

A strong sense of weakness struck Richard's heart, and he couldn't help but stagger two steps back, leaning into a warm embrace. Lina had been well-prepared, catching him before he fell. The Dragonmage was fully aware of the consequences of soul contracts, so she took out two energy potions that she'd prepared

beforehand. One she passed to Richard, while the other was fed to Waterflower.

Richard felt his strength return slowly once he took the potion, growing a little better. He realised then that he could clearly tell Waterflower's exact location from just his mind, also being aware of the state of her mind.

The girl slowly got up again. She bolted out of Lina's arms the moment she regained consciousness, unsheathing the sword and observing her surroundings warily. Richard could feel that she did not know why she'd lost consciousness, and was instinctively trying to identify unknown enemies.

The youthful girl looked at Richard in surprise, as if she felt the effects of the soul contract as well. Richard sent her waves of comfort through their connection, having her calm down enough to sheath the sword again and steadily inch towards him. With the power of the contract acting on her, Richard's breath felt like the safest and most peaceful place in the world.

Schiller let out a long sigh, "You've already chosen a soulguard, it's time to leave this place. I hear that your schedule is quite tight."

Richard nodded, turning his back to leave only to feel the earth suddenly shaking. A thunderous roar echoed from behind him, "Hey there, young master! That Waterflower chick is pretty awesome, but Gangdor isn't all that bad too! Now at least she's no match for me. Look, my axe can't handle the hunger anymore. See how rough and tough it is! It sure won't let you down!"

Richard stopped in his tracks, staring at the tough man who'd darted all the way here. Waterflower took a careful step forward, gripping tightly onto the Shepherd of Eternal Rest. With this sword in hand she wasn't afraid of him at all.

Richard hesitated for a while, before he said to Schiller, "I want to take this person with me too."

Schiller muttered to himself for a bit and replied, “Although the orders were for one protector, it isn’t forbidden to take a second with you as long as Marquess Gatton provides some additional compensation. However, I need to remind you that there is no loyalty with the people who come from the death camp. Only great power can force them into submission. My suggestion is to use an enslavement contract, you’ll come to see that the investment is worth it.”

Richard nodded, turning towards the giant brute. Gangdor had consciously kept a 15-metre distance from him, avoiding stepping into the danger zone. Richard asked him, “Then are you willing to bear a slave contract?”

Gangdor laughed, “If you need me to prove my loyalty, I gladly accept! As long as I can leave this damned place, as long as I can slaughter my way through a real battlefield, I can do anything! Look at this rough and tough axe, it can’t handle the—”

“Alright, I get it!” Richard cut him off, turning to the Dragonmage, “Lina?”

“The preparations are complete.” Lina took out a crimson scroll, throwing it over to Gangdor. The brute opened the scroll without hesitation, activating its power. A dark beam of light immediately bore through his chest, but even with the immense pain he only slightly bit his lip. Another black beam entered Richard’s body.

Magic enslavement contracts were rare and precious. Through it, Richard could cause intense pain, even serious damage whenever his heart desired. If he died, anyone contracted to him would experience a significant permanent drop in power. In Norland, where power meant everything, this sort of severe punishment was unbearable.

An enslavement contract was far less powerful than a soul contract, but it was still an effective restriction. Everybody accompanying Richard on his journey this time would be bound to

him in the same way, with the obvious exception of Flowsand.

Lina was still on her guard. When the contract was completed, she used soul magic again to carefully investigate Gangdor and confirm that the contract was in effect. Richard then nodded his head in acknowledgement.

Gangdor then excitedly waved his giant axe and shouted at the other members of the death camp, “You maggots! Your good days have arrived. I, Gangdor, am finally getting the hell out of this damned place! You don’t need to cower under my giant axe, praise your luck for that! Hahaha!”

Looking at the growling Gangdor, Richard suddenly felt his head ache. He said to Schiller, “This was your original best recommendation?”

“If we’re looking at the aspect of battle power, then yes. Of course, that was excluding Waterflower,” Schiller replied expressionlessly.

Richard studied Gangdor again, as well as that eye-catching axe of his that was ‘unable to handle the hunger.’ He sighed, “Alright, let’s get going. We still need to continue on the journey tomorrow.”



# Book 1, Chapter 114 - Mokoff

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Early morning the next day, the bolstered party headed back to Giantwood Town, embarking for Mokoff Port in the east. When Flowsand saw Waterflower and Gangdor, she was a little shocked.

However, obstacles surfaced even before the team took off. The party didn't have any horses that could withstand Gangdor's weight. On top of that, none of the horses would even let Waterflower get close, forget letting her ride them.

Richard eventually had to give his personal armoured warhorse to Gangdor, while Lina found the gentlest horse and fed it calming pills before Waterflower finally got on. It was only then that the journey began smoothly. Truth be told, Gangdor and Waterflower would rather just run to Mokoff on foot. To them, that was faster.

After a three-day-long journey, the small party finally made it to Mokoff, a northeastern port-city of the Sacred Alliance that boasted of natural protection from the winds. It was only because of the Constellation Harbour being closer to Faust that it was more frequently used. On top of that, there was a mountain range to the north of the port but none of the surrounding regions had any specialties, which meant it could never prosper.

The fief was basically independent, with its leader only seeming to vow loyalty to the Sacred Alliance Emperor on the surface. Morfan only paid their taxes for formality's sake, as the annual proof of his 'allegiance.' In this city of only ten thousand people, he was the supreme ruler. A supreme ruler known for his audacious slaving business.

Because of the port's location, Mokoff had slaves of almost every race. From grey dwarves to the nagas, and because of its nearly sovereign nature even third-generation human nobles without position and certain elven and winged tribes. If the buyer paid a high enough price, they could even get their hands on creatures

with royal blood in them! However, the sale of such “merchandise” was an underground business. The buyers needed wealth and status for the deal to take place, and these were all people who acquired bizarre things and creatures as trophies or for experiments. Every inch of Mokoff’s land exuded the scent of blood and money.

Stepping into the port’s lands, Richard was detained by a patrol team. With rune knights, light cavalry and mages in his party, they obviously weren’t ordinary adventurers, basically as good as an army. This was enough to attract everyone’s attention.

Richard took the chance to observe the people who had stopped them. All six of the guards had both weapons and armour of superior quality, exceeding normal standards by at least 20%. The guards themselves were also at least level 5 each, giving one a sense of Mokoff’s power.

The coachman who’d come along with Flowsand was the one who negotiated with the guards. Once they saw the token of the Eternal Dragon that he gave them, their attitudes turned on the head. The leader sent two of his guards to report the group’s arrival, before leading them personally to the city proper.

Morfan was a middle-aged man who seemed more like a merchant than a portmaster, and negotiations with him went rather smoothly. He welcomed Richard and Flowsand with appropriate enthusiasm, asking his men to bring the two to select slaves immediately.

Their destination for this trip was a small slaving camp at the outskirts of the city. There were thrice as many guards here as in ordinary camps, making it clear how valuable the prisoners here were. There was another odd thing about this camp;—Richard and Flowsand did not hear the usual shouts and sounds of agony. The guards were the only ones moving around the large area, making the entire campsite look quite deserted. It was quite evident that the common slaves had been moved away.

Richard followed Morfan's assistant to a shack in the north of the campsite. A pungent odour assaulted their noses the moment they stepped in, but ever since the death camp Richard seemed immune to such things. He showed no discomfort as he trailed the assistant, something that surprised the other party and caused him to reevaluate this young mage.

Even more surprising was that Flowsand actually followed them this time around. Her expression was emotionless as usual, making her seem oblivious to the bad environment.

Thick metal fences separated the shack into different cells. This place was the living quarters of the slaves, but only seven slaves occupied the entire shack. Or rather, seven groups of slaves; the biggest cell actually had two trolls within.

Of course, the trolls attracted Richard's attention. They were an intelligent race that was found commonly in Norland, related by blood to both humans and therianthropes. Of course, this didn't stop them from having these 'cousins' of theirs in their diets.

The strength of a troll was as great as its size, with a mature adult easily surpassing a level 10 warrior in strength. They weren't dumb despite their big size, and in fact many believed that their intellect did not lose out to that of the humans and elves. That fact was evident merely from the number of mages and shamans in their ranks.

When trolls reached a certain level of power, there was a chance for them to undergo a mutation. The most common of these was growing another head, with two-headed trolls far surpassing their kin be it in magic or physical strength. One often needed a team of adventurers of different classes with good chemistry to deal with such power.

Richard saw these two trolls had yet to mature, their physiques being noticeably smaller than ordinary members of their race. However, an unnerving feeling settled in the pit of his stomach.

They were clean, almost too clean to be trolls. And unlike ordinary trolls who were easily incensed, they were quite relaxed as well. Just as Richard was observing them, they too were looking at this boy before them. It was clear that they were smarter than normal.

“Why are there two trolls here?” Richard asked.

Morfan’s assistant replied, “They were discovered by an adventurer team in the north mountains. They used to live with an old druid, I hear he’s the one who’d brought them up. He taught them language, writing, even magic. His influence left them with various human habits.”

“And then?” Even if he asked, Richard could predict the latter part of the story.

“Then...” The assistant shrugged, “The team realised their worth, so they killed the druid and sold the trolls to us. Ah, this was the first time Master Morfan spent ten thousand on a single troll! But of course. These trolls are smart, far smarter than average. It also makes them far more dangerous.”

The assistant pointed to the taller and stronger one as he explained, “That one is a warrior, called Medium Rare. The one beside him is a mage, name Tiramisu.”

“Sorry, what?” If Richard’s mouth had been filled with water, the assistant would have been sprayed down right about now. Trolls were commonly named after epic skills or weapons, like Flamefist or Gianthammer. This was the first time he’d heard of such a unique name.

# Book 1, Chapter 115 - Mokoff

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The assistant laughed, “Special names, aren’t they? These two are self-proclaimed gourmets. But be warned, as intelligent as they are trolls are trolls. Intelligence doesn’t relate to appetite, only danger; they see us as food. Don’t count on them abiding by the laws, and don’t have any hopes for their loyalty either. They only pledge loyalty to those who have the power to kill them in the moment.

Tiramisu grew displeased upon hearing the ill words about him, “Ignorant human! Don’t treat us as if we are ordinary trolls! We are gourmets!”

Richard laughed this time. These two trolls were interesting indeed, but he still decided to look through all seven cells before making a choice. He’d already known Morfan would prepare a batch of unique slaves for him, but from the quality of these slaves it seemed like Morfan really viewed high priestess Ferlyn with great respect. Sadly, he couldn’t take all of the slaves. The interplanar portal only allowed for a small number of people.

There were mages, warriors, assassins, even a priest amongst the slaves, a real priest! It was beyond remarkable that one could abduct someone of faith, turning him into a slave. It caused Richard to grow curious about Morfan’s background.

An unusual entry was an elven bard. The man was quarter human and three quarters sun-elf, a rare species. His elven heritage made him look beautiful, so much so that he could pass as a beauty if he dressed as a girl.

Another thing that caught Richard’s attention was the last cell he visited. Inside was a drow warrior, a classical example of her race: arrogant, sultry, and murderous, with dark skin and long silver hair.

When Richard first saw her, she was cowering in a dark corner of

the cell, avoiding sunlight at all costs. Her dark skin made her almost indistinguishable from the shadows, and one would have missed her if they were not attentive.

Dark elves were quite restricted in the day, but at night they turned into the most dangerous of opponents. This one was a warrior, not one of the dreaded shamans, but Morfan still priced her at 60,000 gold, more expensive than the two trolls combined.

That was just the cold hard truth, though. The trolls were good-for-nothings apart from their use in battle, but the young and beautiful elf was different. Her main use wasn't on the field, it was instead on a soft and fluffy bed. She was worth the price for most royalty.

Once they'd gone through everyone once, the assistant turned around and asked, "So? Have you made up your mind, young master?"

Richard was still considering it, but Flowsand was quick to speak, "The trolls and the bard." She then sensed Richard's inquisitive gaze, saying indifferently, "They have the potential to become saints. The rest do not."

"You can probe their potential?" Richard asked in shock. He'd gone through a test when he first entered the Deepblue as well, but he remembered it being an unbearably long and painful procedure.

Flowsand nodded, "Yes, but it has a great price. Such things drain my blessing, if I probe any further I will fall in level."

Richard understood her immediately, walking over to the assistant and pointing Flowsand's choices out, "I want these three."

The assistant was rather dumbfounded at his choice, taking a glance at the drow. He didn't understand why she was not one of Richard's choices, given how many uses she had. The dark elf came from Morfan's personal collection, one that he'd curated for

royalty. He'd only added this rare treasure here as a gesture of goodwill once he saw that Flowsand had come along as well.

But then, he had second thoughts as he looked at the elven bard. Royals had all sorts of bizarre fetishes, and this bard had more than one use as well. In fact, he might even have more uses than that elf.

The assistant sorted his thoughts out, no longer doubting Richard's decision. He proceeded to finish his duty, explaining the precautions they had to take, "Alright. I need to remind you that slaves are slaves, regardless of quality. None of them took on this role willingly, so you should not count on their loyalty. Be alert at all times, and prepared to deliver harsh punishments if the time calls for it."

"No need to worry, I have contracts," Richard said, taking out a scroll for each slave.

"Magic slave contracts! Okay, I understand. Still, young master, remember my words." The assistant's tone held respect, but his thoughts were otherwise. Although these contracts were the best assurance of a slave's loyalty, it depended on the situation. The scrolls in Richard's hands were almost the same price as the slaves. He would rather use that extra money to buy more slaves instead of being wasteful like this. There were plenty of ways to train them, and the occasional sacrifice of one or two was nothing.

The trolls and the elf stood still as the contracts took effect, before following Richard out. The elven bard introduced himself, his background, and his skills using poetry.

He was Olar Floatwind, the child of a strong sun elf warrior and a half-elf. His impure heritage left him facing discrimination since birth, causing his mother to take him and wander alone. He was eventually captured by a team of adventurers, becoming a slave. However, Olar's bloodline abilities and talent started to show as he grew. He was currently a level 8 bard, and rather skilled at archery

as well, all without any formal training. He would be thirty this year, but that only barely made him an adult amongst the elves who lived to two hundred years of age.

Bards were similar to clerics, mages, and assassins all at once. Those of this class mainly supported their party in battle. This wasn't a class Olar had chosen himself; it was something he had been forced into by slave traffickers to please the aristocrats and royalty. His beautiful soothing voice, striking looks, and aura made any banquet calm and satisfying. Some ladies even fell head over heels for him.

Richard paid the assistant upon their arrival at Mokoff, and bought some equipment for his newly acquired slaves in the market. They quickly made their way to a docked ship without rest, starting their journey for the final goal of this journey.

The ship was enormous, able to hold up to 500 people at once on a long-haul journey. Everyone occupying it was from either the Archerons or the Church of the Eternal Dragon, carefully selected after multiple stringent tests. Apart from sailors and soldiers, they'd also brought along dozens of craftsmen of different specialisations, as well about ten low-level mages.

Their destination this time was an island not on the Alliance's records, leaving Richard able to claim it for his own the moment he arrived. And Richard already had a name in mind for it: Yessë-va-ilu. It was a term from the ancient elven language, meaning the beginning of everything.

The passengers of this ship were to become the first settlers of Yessë-va-ilu, the first of Richard's citizens. And for this, Richard had added another 15,000 coins to the debt he owed the Archerons.



# Book 1, Chapter 116 - Behind the Scenes

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Having sailed the vast ocean for three whole days, the ship had long since departed from common routes. It was on the fourth morning that Yessë-va-ilu appeared on the horizon, an island over tens of kilometres wide with springs on the eastern mountains for water, and a forest that covered half of its land providing timber. After Richard stepped foot on the island, he had a small village and port set up.

The ship dropped anchor, sending the group of people and their belongings through a smaller boat. Richard, Flowsand, and Lina entered the forest, searching for a suitable area to set up the portal. As Richard's soulguard, Waterflower lurked in the vicinity as well. He could occasionally feel some faint joy from the girl through their connection, likely being related to having returned to the forest.

Lina eventually decided on the foot of a small hill, taking magic crystals out of her spatial pouch to set up the formation. The formation was extremely complicated, requiring even the Dragonmage one day at minimum to set up.

That night, Richard had a few bonfires set up around the area. He sat down with Flowsand at his side, grilling the prey that Waterflower had captured. Lina continued to work, placing crystals into their position from time to time as the formation flashed with a wondrous brilliance.

They could see the bonfires at the shore from their location, with the tens of tents set up there. If his expedition into the plane was successful, future generations could stay here, using the port and village they were setting up.

The bonfire flickered continuously, illuminating the two's faces from time to time. Neither spoke. Even if they were heading for a low-level plane, with nothing expected to happen, nobody could be

sure of what they would face. On the eve of their expedition, the pressure had magnified itself in front of them.

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It was not a tranquil evening in Faust. Several griffins glided across the night sky, bathed in the brilliance of the seven moons as their riders skillfully landed them onto the first island of Faust's seventh layer. Several important figures gathered in a lavish and spacious living room, representing not themselves but the families standing behind them.

Between the two sides sat a stern-looking old man. This was Duke Bickar Mensa, the head of the Mensas that occupied what was commonly called island 7-1. Like the Josephs, the Mensas were well-known aristocrats that had their legacies passed down through generations. Their existence was even older than that of the Sacred Alliance, their power evident just from their position amongst the fourteen.

On the duke's left was Baron Raymond Joseph, while on his right was a handsome yet sinister-looking youth. That was Viscount Dasher of the Wellington Family, true big-shots that occupied the island 6-3. As for the last representative, the one from the Schumpeters that occupied island 7-7, he could only sit further away, at the side of Viscount Dasher.

These four families combined made for an extremely powerful force. As for the issue that had gathered them all together? The threat of the Archerons, of Richard Archeron.

Paying his greetings in respect to the Duke, Raymond surveyed everyone in the room before he spoke solemnly, "Everyone, the Archerons have not been on the floating islands of Faust for even two years, with only three sacrifices to their name, but they've already managed to have their island shift. I'm sure everyone present here is quite clear on what that means. We cannot allow this group of lunatics to expand any further, and need to adopt a

powerful strategy to suppress them

“The first target is Richard Archeron. I’ve gathered that he’s not just a student of the legendary mage, but also someone who has the potential to become a grand runemaster in the future. Indeed, a grand runemaster! That isn’t something I’m exaggerating in order to incite action; my latest reports say that a compoundable rune he crafted was sold on auction for over five million gold.”

Pat! The Schumpeter family representative slapped the sides of his seat, saying passionately, “If we’d known that earlier we would have killed him the night he went to the ceremony with Gaton!”

Dasher harrumphed, saying cynically, “Kill him? I heard there were several families waiting in the dark to ambush them, but nobody dared step up in the end. Being this afraid of Gaton, hmph! I’m sure the Schumpeters were amongst those in ambush?”

The representative of the Schumpeters turned red with anger, but he didn’t dare rebuke the viscount. As the family occupying the seventh island they were in an extremely awkward position, having to face the onslaught of any new entrants first. They needed the Wellingtons’ support in crucial moments.

However, given their sensitive position how would they dare arouse the wrath of the Archerons? If they started a war with that bunch of lunatics, even if they managed to survive they would lose an immense amount of resources. Who knows if any of the families eyeing the floating islands would seize the opportunity and attack them?

And this was all assuming they would be able to withstand an Archeron assault, something even this representative himself doubted. Gaton had cleanly destroyed the family that had occupied island 7-3, engaging in a full frontal war with someone like him? Don’t even think about it. Even the nemeses of the Archerons, the Josephs, would never do such a foolish thing.

Raymond spoke up to dispel the awkward atmosphere,

“Everyone. According to what I know, it wasn’t Gaton that performed the ceremony that night. It was Richard.”

“Richard?” Duke Mensa snorted and furrowed his brows, “The fellow seems to have left Faust the moment the ceremony ended. He likely obtained a powerful time-related blessing. If he’s lucky enough, it could even have been prolonged life, or accelerated time in a different plane. The next time we see him, he could very well pose a huge threat to us.”

“If he was blessed with innate talent, or a specific rune, we might be facing a saint runemaster in the future! Don’t forget Saint Peter and his legendary divine set!” Raymond added.

The atmosphere in the discussion room turned gloomy in an instant. All those present acknowledged the threat Richard posed from the information they had been provided. It greatly increased the level of his threat even beyond Alice, putting him second in the Archerons only to Gaton himself. And the most terrible thing? He received even more blessings than Gaton. Even if everyone present knew the Josephs had some selfish desire in their proposition, the rest were just the same. Gaton’s shadow was like a sword looming over their heads, and the very first to be beheaded might just be the Josephs.

Duke Mensa eventually made up his mind, breaking the long silence, “We have to take action. We cannot let Richard grow in power.”

# Book 1, Chapter 117 - Behind the Scenes

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“Take action?” Dasher looked at the Duke with contempt, snorting, “What kind of action? Richard left Faust a week ago, his destination unknown. He’s definitely embarked on an expedition to a plane, and don’t dream of getting the coordinates anytime soon. High Priestess Ferlyn even had Daybreak accompany him! Do you think we’ll be able to get the location out of the Church of the Eternal Dragon?”

“Richard and Flowsand... You haven’t realised?” Raymond asked with a smile. He didn’t seem dismayed, instead very confident..

Dasher’s face darkened, and he obviously wasn’t happy with Raymond’s behaviour. Although they both occupied the same layer, the Wellingtons were undeniably far stronger than the Josephs. In fact, the Josephs had only lost power through their war of attrition with the Archerons.

However, Raymond didn’t continue to keep them guessing, “Richard and Flowsand being together will mean that they’re going to a low-level plane. A party formed for such an expedition will be limited to level 10 or so. We don’t have to get the coordinates from Gaton or the Church, in fact we don’t have to get the coordinates at all. As long as we’re able to shift where they end up, our plans can be achieved.”

“You mean to...?” Dasher’s eyes flashed. He didn’t seem to dislike this fellow as much anymore.

Raymond immediately replied, “Simple. We can perform a ceremony of our own, using the entirety of the blessing to change the coordinates Richard will be teleporting to. Turn it into an intermediate plane that needs those at least at level 18 to conquer! Then we can get the coordinates for this new plane, and send our own parties to vie for the resources there. While we’re at it, we can have Richard killed as well. The laws allow us to send expeditions

capped at level 15, so it won't be a huge strain on our resources and won't draw the attention of the Archerons. And based on levels alone we'll have an absolute advantage over his party.

Duke Mensa pondered for a while before speaking, "This is a good idea, but it has already been a week..." Sacrifices could only change the future, not the past.

Raymond added in a hurry, "He should still be off somewhere making preparations. We've always had our eyes on important Archerons, and Richard definitely didn't have the resources for an expedition prepared before the ceremony. We must still strike quickly, however; our time is running out." Raymond's confidence caused the representatives of the other families to exchange looks. With the two families being arch enemies, the Josephs spying on the Archerons was nothing new.

Duke Mensa chimed in, "Richard's blessings weren't low. We'll need a ceremony with thrice the offerings."

"We'll be able to accomplish that if we divide it amongst ourselves," Dasher interjected. He then turned to the Schumpeter representative, frowning, "As for you guys..."

The Schumpeters had just performed a ceremony a few months ago, and their strength had dropped greatly in recent years. They wouldn't be able to take anything decent out of their vaults. However, they would definitely be thrown out of this circle if they didn't make any contributions at a time like this.

When Dasher's gaze swept past him, the Schumpeters' representative gritted his teeth and said, "Leave the boy to us. We'll divide the resources from the new plane equally amongst our families."

"It won't be that easy to deal with those two," Dasher didn't release his hold on the man, "Who'll be in charge of the mission?"

The Schumpeter representative gritted his teeth again,

“Sinclair!”

“Very well then, it’s all settled!” Dasher seemed to be satisfied, a rare sight. He moved the discussion forward, discussing the sacrifices with the other two...

Midnight. Duke Mensa personally led a party of knights to the Church of the Eternal Dragon, beginning a ceremony in a bid to obtain blessings. This was supposed to be a low-grade ceremony arranged at the last minute, so Derlyn herself did not show up. A random priestess would be enough to officiate.

Once the ceremony began, however, the light in the church grew more and more radiant. Divine energy surged from the void, and just the sheer amount of it indicated that this was the highest grade of ceremony. This was an extremely rare occurrence, causing the officiating priestess to nearly faint with happiness. Such a grand ceremony wouldn’t normally be open for her to conduct, so this was a blessing. She was even more solicitous than usual afterwards, personally escorting the Duke out of the church.

The ceremony performed in the middle of the night was a hot topic in aristocratic circles for a few weeks. Duke Mensa’s close friends visited him on occasion, congratulating him. They all believed that such a great blessing would cement his position in the Sacred Alliance further, perhaps to the point that he wouldn’t have to worry about the Archeron threat anymore.

Every time, Duke Mensa only expressed his gratitude. He didn’t reveal any details of the ceremony, leaving these ‘close friends’ with no information about the events leading up to it.

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Richard had no idea of the events that had unfolded in Faust. They were on the eve of departure, the final night of preparations finally here. And that passed quickly as well— between the head count, preparing equipment, readying themselves for emergencies, and many other little matters like that, the sun had crept its way

back onto the horizon.

Lina had already prepared the formation, leaving it awaiting activation. She remained prudent, ensuring that there were no problems with the coordinates repeatedly. Richard made a final confirmation as well, just before he would teleport away.

The party this time consisted of him, Flowsand, Waterflower, Gangdor, the trolls, Olar, and a small group of footsoldiers provided by the Archerons. Nobody except Richard, Flowsand, and Waterflower carried high-grade equipment so they wouldn't have to use much energy for teleportation, and all of his runecrafting supplies were stuffed into two large boxes.

Once she ascertained that everything was in place, Lina activated the portal. Immense mana surged from the crystals placed all over the formation, tearing the void above it until an ancient law stabilised the rift. It eventually formed a portal that they would be able to pass through one at a time.

The footsoldiers were the first through the portal, followed by Gangdor, the trolls, and then the rest. Once Flowsand stepped through as well, Richard was the only one remaining.

“Wait a minute!” Lina called out, walking up to Richard, “Good luck, Little Richard!”

“Thank you!” Richard smiled, wanting to shake her hand. However, the Dragonmage instead gave him a warm hug, one so tight that Richard could distinctly feel her figure pressing into his body. However, it conveyed her sincere well-wishes and concern.

Richard walked back to the portal. In the final moment before he left, he turned around and waved, “I'll definitely return!”

There was a common saying amongst those of Norland embarking on an expedition: the portal was like a mirror. But one step, and one would end up in an entirely different world. Nobody knew what they would encounter in the other plane, forget



whether they could grow a base and stabilise their position there, obtaining resources and returning home. Once Richard stepped foot through the portal, nobody knew when it would be that he stepped back onto the soil of Norland once more.

Seeing the boy's figure disappear through the portal, Lina felt a sudden urge to cry. It wasn't because Richard was special, but because this scene brought back many memories from the past. This wasn't the first time the Dragonmage was setting up a portal to a different plane, personally sending off many people on their journeys. There were strangers, comrades, family members, friends, and lovers. They were all bold, decisive and intelligent, and were outstanding people of their times.

Many of them had remained uncontactable since.

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